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# **PLAYIN' THA GAME:**

**THE ROLE IDENTITY PLAYS IN B-BALL PLAYERS'  
AND GANGSTA RAPPERS' PUBLIC STANCES ON  
BLACK SOCIOPOLITICAL ISSUES**

**A SENIOR THESIS BY KELSEY COX  
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**VASSAR COLLEGE  
MEDIA STUDIES  
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# INTRODUCTION

## A CULTURAL LOVE AFFAIR

Rap and basketball have been intertwined for decades. The height of a predominantly black NBA coincided with the emergence of the rap era. These were two avenues that provided an opportunity for thousands of young black men to become millionaires and gain social mobility. At the same time rap and basketball captivated male youth culture, connecting adolescents from different races and backgrounds. Rap and basketball are two areas of entertainment that heavily influenced mainstream black popular culture. Sports, and in particular basketball, are “one of the areas where there has been a consistent Black presence, even dominance”<sup>1</sup>. Rap and basketball do far more than impact black popular culture, they influence each other. They share a common language, borrow each others style, and aim for the same demographics.

Artists and basketball players share a common language because they have similar upbringing experiences. A large number of black professional basketball players grew up in poor homes in unsafe neighborhoods. Whether the neighborhoods had violent gangs, a rampant drug culture, or poor educational resources, basketball was seen as a way to get out of the hood. It was an escape that could not only distract you from the realities of where you lived but also provided an opportunity for you, if you went pro, to also move your family out of the hood. Rap artists were growing up in these same type of neighborhoods. They used music to escape from their realities or paint a picture of them.

One of the prominent aspects that connects rap and basketball is the vernacular that is used in both cultures. One of the most common phrases used in black popular culture is “the game”. The game is often used in reference to the rap game, the basketball game, and the dope game. All of these games were a part of urban black youth culture during the post-Reagan era. While the rap and basketball games were used for self expression and entertainment, it is the

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<sup>1</sup> Todd Boyd and Kenneth L. Shropshire, *Basketball Jones: America above the Rim* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), pg.ix

dope game that had the most impact on the cultural expression of the two. In 1985 the number of people who admitted to regularly doing crack in the United States was 5.8 million<sup>2</sup>. While black people weren't the largest users of crack, it affected black communities in negative ways. Black communities were the overwhelming targets of crack related arrests and were given unfairly high sentences compared to their cocaine counterparts due to sentencing guidelines.

The crack epidemic also affected the rap and basketball games. Crack is often localized in the ghetto, the central location of gangsta rap. For example the news would often focus its crack related reports on the ghetto. Whether rappers were selling it, consuming it, or commenting on how it was destroying their communities, crack was heavily referenced in rap songs like Public Enemy's "Night of the Living Baseheads" or Shinehead's "Gimme No Crack". Rappers also used the crack epidemic to criticize the government for their involvement in the criminalization and negative imaging of black bodies.

In the early 1980s the NBA was having their own problem with the crack epidemic. Crack is a chemically purified cheaper pellet form of cocaine. While cocaine was seen as a upper-class drug, NBA players also did crack because of its high potency and low price. It was speculated that "as many as 75 percent of the league's players were regular cocaine users"<sup>3</sup>. This was troublesome for the NBA because advertisers and fans didn't want to support a crack filled league. It is also worth noting that "Black players at the time made up more than 70 percent of the NBA's personnel"<sup>4</sup>. It was the fact that the league had a black problem coupled with a drug problem that lead the NBA to revamp its image.

One of the biggest areas of influence that basketball and hip hop have had on each other is style. It is through style that people reveal parts of their personal identity. Style and clothing are used as a forms of expression. From rappers rocking NBA jerseys to NBA stars wearing baggy clothes, rap and basketball borrowed each other's styles. Allen Iverson is the NBA star who is thought to have borrowed the majority of his style from hip hop. In many ways Iverson looks like your typical hip hop artist. He has "multiple tattoos, a do' rag, cornrows, and abundant platinum

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<sup>2</sup> "The Crack Epidemic - The History of Crack Cocaine - Drug-Free World," The Crack Epidemic - The History of Crack Cocaine - Drug-Free World, accessed December 14, 2015, <http://www.drugfreeworld.org/drugfacts/crackcocaine/a-short-history.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Todd Boyd, *Young, Black, Rich, and Famous: The Rise of the NBA, the Hip Hop Invasion, and the Transformation of American Culture* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), pg.25

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pg.25

jewelry”<sup>5</sup>. He even “recorded a gangsta rap album which, though never released, caused a great deal of controversy nonetheless”<sup>6</sup>. Despite Iverson’s immense talent on the court, he was perceived as a thug, in large part due to his identification with hip hop culture.

Iverson had a very difficult upbringing and although he was continually surrounded by controversy, people always assumed the worst in him. Iverson was born in Hampton, Virginia to a 15-year-old single mother and grew up in poverty. While Iverson was very athletic and talented it was his famous court case that tainted his image. When Iverson was 17, his black friends and another group of white people engaged in a fight with each other at a bowling alley. It was during this fight that Iverson allegedly struck a white woman in the head with a chair. When the police arrived it was only Iverson and his black friends who were arrested. Iverson was convicted as an adult of maiming by mob, which was a felony. Iverson was given 15 years however after spending four months in prison his conviction was overturned for lack of sufficient evidence. While Iverson was ultimately found not guilty people still judge him based on this case. Some people viewed Iverson as “a thug who represents the worst possible image of a modern-day basketball player”<sup>7</sup>. Others viewed him as the beloved hip hop/basketball gateway between the late 1990s and early 2000s. Whether it was his style or his attitude, Iverson had a large impact on popular culture. Even to this day he is still the subject of popular rap songs, personal style, and playing style.

Rap and basketball players also have the same demographic when it comes to consumption. While rap songs are about an artist’s experiences and aims to create a connection with black adolescents, their music is largely consumed by white suburban teens. Black rap artists and black teens have a shared experience and would most likely be able to relate to their music, however the fascination with black culture that white suburban teens have make them the dominate consumers. The same can be said for basketball players. While players may use rap or images akin to black popular culture to sell their shoes their high prices make them unaffordable for black teens. Obtaining shoes that cost \$200 is just not a reality for urban poor black teens. So the majority consumer becomes suburban white teens who can afford these prices.

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<sup>5</sup> Todd Boyd, *Young, Black, Rich, and Famous: The Rise of the NBA, the Hip Hop Invasion, and the Transformation of American Culture* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), pg.4

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pg.4

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pg.5

Although there are clear ties between rap and basketball, the manner in which respective star's personas align with their personal identity as opposed to their brand identity varies greatly. This variance on their persona alignment in turn dictates their engagement with issues that affect black communities. Personal identity can be defined as "the concept you develop about yourself...[which] may include aspects of your life that you have no control over, such as where you grew up or the color of your skin"<sup>8</sup>. People may demonstrate aspects of their personal identity through what they wear, how they talk, or various other ways. A brand identity is that which is constructed, whether by oneself or other entities, that is able to be controlled. In the case of people, rather than companies, their brand identities are based off of their personal branding, how they market themselves. Personal branding is "the ongoing process of establishing a prescribed image or impression in the mind of others about an individual"<sup>9</sup>. For instance it is the way Steve Jobs is associated with a black turtle neck and blue jeans. His outfit is one part of his personal brand and thus his brand identity. In the 1990s gangsta rappers were more likely to have their personas aligned with their personal identities whereas NBA stars were more concerned about their brand identity. The recent advent of social media has made it so that NBA stars are able to easily express their personal identities; which in turn has made them more vocal about issues that affect black communities.

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<sup>8</sup> Christine Scarince, "What Is Personal Identity? - Definition, Philosophy & Development," Study.com, accessed April 02, 2016, <http://study.com/academy/lesson/what-is-personal-identity-definition-philosophy-development.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Los Ellis, "Creating Your Personal Brand" (speech, SMTULSA Social Business Conference, Aloft Tulsa Downtown, Tulsa, March 21, 2014).





# OUR HISTORIES

## BLACK BODIES: DRUGS, JAIL, AND A CORRUPT SYSTEM

In the 1970s there was a cocaine boom across the country. A glut of cocaine was shipped to the United States and caused the price of the drug to dramatically drop. During this boom a crystalized form of cocaine, crack cocaine, was developed and swept through the country throughout the 1980s. Crack became highly profitable for dealers because it was cheap to make and could be sold in smaller quantities to more people. Crack cocaine is a solidified freebased form of cocaine. It offers a short but intense high to the user and is relatively easy and cheap to produce. The usage of crack spread primarily in poor inner-city neighborhoods. The three cities that saw the greatest usage of crack in 1984-1990 were New York, Los Angeles, and Miami. It was obvious that America had a crack problem. President Ronald Reagan tackled the crack epidemic head on by starting a war on drugs.

One of the starting points for Reagan's war on drugs was Nancy Reagan's "Just Say No" campaign. While this campaign had no policy attached and didn't advocate for policy changes, it was successful in garnering attention from the American public. Meanwhile Ronald Reagan was creating policy changes. In 1982 Reagan's administration "and congress authorized \$125 million to establish twelve new regional drug task forces staffed by more than a thousand new FBI and DEA agents and federal prosecutors"<sup>10</sup>. This was all in an effort to lock up drug users and continue the tough on crime movement that was created by Nixon. This authorization had a dramatic effect on the prison population. In the years 1982 to 1988, federal drug prosecutions increased by 99 percent<sup>11</sup>. This was just the beginning of Reagan's tough on crime movement.

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<sup>10</sup> Marc Mauer, *Race to Incarcerate* (New York: New Press, 1999), pg. 61

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., pg. 61

Ronald Reagan wanted to win the war on drugs and thought that going after dealers and addicts was the right course of action. His plan was to increase the severity of even minor drug crimes, putting more people in prison for longer periods of time. Reagan's focus in the war on drugs was crack cocaine and the violent crimes that were committed because of the drug. Reagan's drug war has been debilitating to black communities and "has exacerbated racial disparities in incarceration while failing to have any sustained impact on the drug problem"<sup>12</sup>. It is the drug war that has led to a substantial increase in the black prison population from the 1980s-1990s. Part of this increase can be attributed to the different ways crack and cocaine were prosecuted.

Crack, seen as a poor black man's drug, carried a much heavier sentence than cocaine. Someone who was arrested with "500 grams of powder cocaine would face a five-year mandatory minimum; crack offenders would have to be in possession of a mere 5 grams to face the same obligatory sentence"<sup>13</sup>. The majority of those getting arrested for crack were black. Crack, a "black drug", was sending black people to jail for staggering amounts of time, while those prosecuted for cocaine, a "white drug", were mainly white and getting off on lesser time. The amount of drugs arrests has sharply increased since a drug war was declared. In 1980, "there were 581,000 arrests for drug offenses, a number that nearly doubled to 1,090,000 by 1990"<sup>14</sup>. While the number of arrests were rising during this period so was the percentage of black people arrested. In 1980, "African-Americans, who [constituted] 13 percent of the U.S. population, accounted for 21 percent of drug possession arrests nationally. This number rose to a high of 36 percent in 1992"<sup>15</sup>. The numbers are even higher for juveniles. Although black juveniles represented "13 percent of juvenile drug possession arrests in 1980, this proportion climbed to 40 percent by 1991"<sup>16</sup>. These statistics suggest that black people were unfairly being arrested and jailed at a disproportionate rate.

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<sup>12</sup> Marc Mauer, *Race to Incarcerate* (New York: New Press, 1999), pg.158

<sup>13</sup> "The Fair Sentencing Act Corrects a Long-time Wrong in Cocaine Cases," Washington Post, August 03, 2010, accessed January 21, 2016, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/08/02/AR2010080204360.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Marc Mauer, *Race to Incarcerate* (New York: New Press, 1999), pg.159

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., pg. 160

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., pg. 160

The media covered crack cocaine in a way that focused mainly on black users. The media used frames to display the crack epidemic as a low income black problem. Frames “highlight and link data selectively to tell more or less stories that define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest remedies”<sup>17</sup>. As stated by Erving Goffman, “in social theory, framing is a schema of interpretation, a collection of anecdotes and stereotypes, that individuals rely on to understand and respond to events”<sup>18</sup>. They guide people on how to react and form opinions. Different types of media used negative frames of the crack epidemic to shape public opinion. The majority of newspaper articles about the crack epidemic in the mid-to-late 1980s focused on the arrests of black dealers and users and the police efforts to eliminate crack in low income inner-cities. Few articles mentioned crack as a problem in middle-class neighborhoods and among other races. There were few articles that focused on low income inner-city resident’s feelings about the crack epidemic, what it was doing to their neighborhoods, and how they were trying to combat it. One example of negative framing came from a CBS segment in 1986.

CBS’s segment used negative framing that focused on portraying a community as immoral for their participation in the crack epidemic. The segment was titled “48 Hours on Crack Street” and was 2 hours long. CBS’s 10 correspondents and their camera crew went around New York to investigate the drug trade. In the segment, CBS describes itself as being on “the streets”. “The streets” is slang that is used by working class communities to describe where they live, where illegal activities take place, or where they spend most of their time. This slang is typically synonymous with the ghetto, an undesirable place to live. By using this slang CBS is negatively framing their location before introducing the audience to any investigative work. They are predisposing the audience to think of their location as dangerous, poor, black, immoral and corrupt.

This type of framing effects how black people, especially black men, were viewed as a whole. It created new prejudices and reaffirmed old ones about black people. Black people were seen as the root of the problem and the cause of violence and destruction in communities. Even though crack had spread throughout the suburbs and the middle-class it was only seen as a problem of black communities. Crack users who were upper-class or white were treated like

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<sup>17</sup> Robert M. Entman and Andrew Rojecki, *The Black Image in the White Mind: Media and Race in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), pg. 49

<sup>18</sup> Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974).

addicts while black lower-class users were seen as villains. It was a black drug and thus any negative consequences that came from it were associated with black people. Even higher-class black people weren't exempt from negative public perceptions. When the NBA had a crack problem it was the black players who took the fall.

## THE NBA: THE FALL AND REBIRTH

The National Basketball Association (NBA) was founded in 1946 in New York. The NBA was created from the merger of the Basketball Association of America (BAA) and the National Basketball League (NBL). The biggest difference between the BAA and the NBL was that the BAA was established in big cities while the NBL was made up of Great Lakes area small-market teams. The NBA, at that time, was made up of 17 small and big market teams from the BAA and NBL. In 1967, the NBA was met with a competing league: the American Basketball Association (ABA). Although the ABA was less established than the NBA it brought an entertainment factor to basketball that the NBA was missing. The ABA focused on “the three point shot; a no foul-out rule; a sustainably patriotic red, white, and blue colored basketball; a less strategically constrained and more expansive style of play; a Slam Dunk Contest as a feature of the league’s All-Star games; and a greater emphasis on player celebrityhood”<sup>19</sup>. While the ABA might have been more entertaining than the NBA, its lack of nationally televised games and low attendance numbers led to its demise in 1976. The ABA merged with the NBA, which adopted four ABA franchises. The newly emerged ABA-NBA struggled financially from the beginning.

During the early 1980s the NBA struggled to draw in fans. In the 1980-81 NBA season “only 7 of the NBA’s 23 franchises made a profit, average game attendance totaled 10,021 or about 58 percent of the league’s arenas and the total league attendance dropped by over a million from the previous year”<sup>20</sup>. The problem that the NBA had was that it was perceived to be too black and filled with drug addicts. Audiences weren’t comfortable watching or supporting black athletes who had drug habits. During this time the NBA was dominated by black men and white audiences couldn’t see themselves within the game. The number of white players in the

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<sup>19</sup> David L. Andrews, *Sport-- Commerce-- Culture: Essays on Sport in Late Capitalist America* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), pg. 14

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 15

NBA 1980-81 season was 24.3 percent<sup>21</sup>. The difference in playing styles between black and white players increased fan's dislike for this new NBA. White players were perceived to be intellectual and methodical players while black players were seen as physically gifted, flashy, and selfish.

It was these qualities displayed by black players that supposedly drove fans away. A *New York Times* reporter noted "the level of play throughout the NBA is under attack. 'Selfishness' is seen to be rampant. Players are disdaining defense, complaining that their salaries aren't astronomical enough, demanding to be traded to some team where they will fit, or where everyone will fit around them"<sup>22</sup>. The reporter is using coded language to say that all of these new problems have arisen because the NBA is too black. He is saying the characteristics of bad defense, selfishness, and wavering commitment are black characteristics. The problem with the league being too black coupled with the perception of a serious drug problem in the NBA led to a theme that black drug addicts were ruining the NBA. A *Washington Post* reporter stated that "for young players, many from unstable families in inner-city ghettos, it is tempting to spend some of their sudden wealth on cocaine"<sup>23</sup>. The *Washington Post* reporter's unnamed sources also estimated that cocaine use by people in the game is at an estimated 45 to 75 percent<sup>24</sup>.

While none of these numbers were official or confirmed, the coded language used by the *Washington Post* reporter paints black athletes as ones who have a cocaine problem. This view held by the public greatly damaged the NBA's marketability. The NBA was having difficulty finding advertisers, getting televised games, and filling arena seats. However this all changed in the mid-1980s when the Larry Bird-Magic Johnson rivalry took off.

Bird and Johnson captured national attention when they faced off against each other in the 1979 NCAA National Championship game, where Bird's Indiana State team lost to Magic's Michigan State team. Once they were drafted, Larry "Hick from French Lick" Bird and Earvin "Magic" Johnson reinvigorated their teams. When David Stern took over as NBA Commissioner

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<sup>21</sup> Buzz Bissinger, "Here's The Real Reason The NBA Is Losing Fans," *Business Insider*, February 18, 2011, accessed February 20, 2016, <http://www.businessinsider.com/heres-the-real-reason-the-nba-is-losing-fans-2011-2>.

<sup>22</sup> David L. Andrews, *Sport-- Commerce-- Culture: Essays on Sport in Late Capitalist America* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), pg. 15

<sup>23</sup> Chris Cobbs, "Widespread Cocaine Use by Players Alarms NBA," *Washington Post*, August 20, 1980, accessed February 20, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/sports/1980/08/20/widespread-cocaine-use-by-players-alarms-nba/0eb819b3-bd92-412a-b14c-baed1a9e7c68/>.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

in 1984 he heightened this rivalry to new levels. David Stern further constructed the identities of Earvin “Magic” Johnson and Larry Bird in the NBA through marketing, media stories lines, and rivalry games to present a league that wasn’t too black and was filled with wholesome characters.

Magic Johnson was drafted by the Lakers in 1979 and was an immediate star. He was selected to the NBA All-Rookie Team and was a starter at the NBA All-Star Game. During his rookie season he became the only rookie to ever win the NBA Finals MVP award. He also became one of only four players to win an NCAA and NBA championship in consecutive years. To say Johnson had taken the league by storm would be an understatement. However Johnson’s star power didn’t translate to advertisers. Advertisers believed that the NBA and its domination of blackness couldn’t sell to Middle (white) America. For example in Johnson’s 1979 endorsement commercial for 7UP he had to share the spotlight with two other white athletes. Advertisers didn’t believe his image alone could sell.

This all changed with the Magic Johnson–Larry Bird rivalry. With this rivalry the NBA made it a “goal of making black men safe for (white) consumers in the interest of profit”<sup>25</sup>. This rivalry was not rooted in anger or hatred but rather rooted in competition. Magic Johnson played for the Lakers while Larry Bird played for the Celtics. These two teams had very different racial identities. The Lakers embodied the identity of Los Angeles; they were flashy, entertaining, and consisted of a roster of mainly black players. The Celtics had the identity of a white working class Boston. The team was a better mix of white and black players, were methodical, and full of tenacity. The Lakers and the Celtics played each other in the NBA Finals in three seasons from 1983-87. These games drew sold out crowds and had some of the highest television ratings. Although the NBA described this as a rivalry Johnson and Bird were friends off the court.

The league posed this rivalry as a dual between two playing styles. Magic Johnson was the naturally gifted quick ball handler. Johnson was a 6ft 9in point guard and was hard to defend. Larry Bird was a slow footed hard worker with a fantastic jump shot. This “provided the league with a compelling divergence between playing styles between individuals who became essentialized embodiments of their respective races”<sup>26</sup>. Johnson became the model for socially acceptable blackness. He was the perfect embodiment of blackness in the league because he was

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<sup>25</sup> D. L. Andrews and M. L. Silk, "Basketball's Ghetto-centric Logic," *American Behavioral Scientist* 53, no. 11 (2010), pg. 1628

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 1629

immensely skilled but also had a disarming demeanor. He was an extremely kind, handsome, charming man who played with an elegant style. Larry Bird provided “a rationale for the continued presence of whiteness within the league”<sup>27</sup>. Bird proved that although he may not be the most skilled, after all he was not gifted with talent like Magic, he had the grit and determination to improve his game. He demonstrated to white people everywhere that the NBA was also a platform for hard work, which whiteness has always represented.

Larry Bird was marketed as the great white hope of basketball in the 1980s. In “a league [where the majority was] black—and the percentage of black starters [was] even higher”<sup>28</sup> Bird’s whiteness stood out. Bird was drafted by the Boston Celtics in 1978. Similar to Magic Johnson, Bird immediately brought success to his team. In his rookie season he was selected to the All-Star team and named Rookie of the Year. Bird had the type of blue collar story that white America craved. Larry Bird grew up in a small town in Indiana with five siblings. He was born into the working class; his mother worked two jobs to keep food on the table. Bird’s parents divorced while he was in high school and his father committed suicide a year later. Bird saw basketball as a way to escape. This is the type of story that is often common among black NBA players, a child in a single-parent home facing adversity, but is foreign to white players. Larry Bird was the exact type of “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” player that white America devoured.

Bird’s playing style is described as cerebral. Although he was slower and very rarely dunked, he based his basketball skills on defense and shooting from long range. He was known for his ability to anticipate his defender’s actions and react to their strategies. Bird’s success showed there was room for a player to have a more intellectual game. The rivalry between Bird and Johnson played a large part in saving the NBA. They helped make the league profitable again and created the start of a new basketball culture that will last forever.

## **GANGSTA RAP: VOICES AND REPUTATIONS**

The beginnings of rap are often located in the mid-late 1970s during the Funkadelic period. Hip Hop was defined by four elements: the MC, the DJ, fashion, and graffiti. The MC was the one who was on the microphone, whether rapping or speaking. The DJ was the one who controls the

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<sup>27</sup> D. L. Andrews and M. L. Silk, “Basketball’s Ghetto-centric Logic,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 53, no. 11 (2010): 1629

<sup>28</sup> Todd Boyd and Kenneth L. Shropshire, *Basketball Jones: America above the Rim* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 70.

turntables and mixed the music. Fashion was a way for established sportswear and fashion brands to attach themselves to emerging rap groups. Members of the same rap group would often dress in a similar style. It was one way to establish your group's identity. Graffiti, much like personal style, was a form of expression and a way of defining oneself. The emergence of block parties in New York City called for DJs to entertain crowds. DJs would use samples from popular songs and feature the percussive breaks. Artists like Grandmaster Flash and Kurtis Blow used and transformed music from funk and disco to create what we know as hip hop.

Rap gained its popularity in the ghettos of New York City and later the West Coast. Prior to 1979 hip hop music wasn't recorded on records for mass distribution, rather the music existed on mixtapes by DJs or recordings of parties. The Sugarhill Gang's "Rappers Delight" is largely regarded as the first hip hop record, which was released in 1979. In the early 1980s hip hop made its way to the radio stations. It was through radio that hip hop started to reach areas outside of New York City on a grand scale. Hip hop was beginning to form a different sound in the mid-1980s, evolving from the funk and disco influences in the 1970s. Songs started to sample rock music, use drum machines, and consisted of taunts and boasts that were delivered in an aggressive way. Hip Hop was becoming commercially successful everywhere. In the mid-to-late 1980s L.A. rappers like Ice-T and N.W.A helped popularized gangsta rap, a subgenera of hip hop, on the West Coast.

Gangsta rap reflects the violent lifestyles of urban black youth. This subgenera of hip hop was pioneered by rappers like Schoolly D and Ice-T and later became commercially successful thanks to Ice-T and N.W.A in the 1980s. Two of their most popular songs, "Cop Killer"(1992) and "Fuck tha Police"(1988), criticize the police and the racism their communities face. In the early 1990s G-funk, a subgenera of gangsta rap, became popular. G-funk, a mix between funk music and a slow form of hip hop, became popular on the West Coast following Dr. Dre. Dre's album *The Chronic*. This album heavily sampled P-Funk bands and became widely popular, demonstrating that West Coast gangsta rap could dominate hip hop. Other successful G-funk artists include Snoop Dog, 2Pac, Warren G, and Nate Dogg. There was a large amount of controversy surrounding gangsta rap in the 1980s and 1990s. People found it difficult to figure out whether gangsta rappers were expressing their situations or glorifying the violence and sex they rapped about.



Gangsta rap has had the public reputation of being a way violent black men express their anger, drug, and violence-filled lives. It is not the music that is so controversial but rather the lyrics. Many of the songs are seen as glorifying guns, drugs, and misogyny. People believe gangsta rap is partially to blame for the problems of street gangs and the dangers of gun violence. Those who hold these views are often stereotyped as suburban white conservatives who are afraid the music will negatively influence their children. However there are also members of black communities that hold the same views. The main fear with gangsta rap is that it causes or incites violent and illegal behavior.

While many gangsta rap artists do engage these controversial topics in their songs, they aren't the cause of violence or undesirable behavior. Rather gangsta raps artists express their views and the real-world crime that is taking place around them. Their songs aren't the cause of societal ills, these societal ills are what they use to create their music. Gangsta rap "deals head-on with universal themes of injustice and oppression—themes which have both bound and divided US society from its inception"<sup>29</sup>. However Gangsta rap is seen as "a 'vile and dangerous' form of cultural expression, a 'primitive music' that attacks 'every shared value that has bound our society together for more than two-hundred years'"<sup>30</sup>. One of the main issues critics hold with gangsta rap is that artists aren't portraying their real lives but rather a fantasy, therefore their lyrics are inciting and not reflecting. People believe gangsta rappers create a false persona and lyrics that suggest they're reality in order to obtain street cred.

Critics from journalism to film critique rappers for putting on a facade. In the film *Bamboozled* (2000), Spike Lee depicted gangsta rap as analogous to minstrel shows. He argued that black gangsta rappers are performing the most ignorant and stereotypical representations of black Americans for entertainment. He argues that instead of finding a meaningful and constructive way to discuss the issues in black communities, gangsta rappers use violent means and violent language. Similarly an oped contributor for the *New York Times* described rappers as "Amos 'n Andy in Nikes"<sup>31</sup>. Once again alluding to the fact that gangsta rappers perform in a similar manner to those who performed in black face.

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<sup>29</sup> Mark S. Hamm and Jeff Ferrell, "Rap, Cops, and Crime: Clarifying the 'Cop Killer' Controversy," *ACJS Today*, 1994, [http://schools.yrdsb.ca/markville.ss/history/honours/Rap\\_Cops\\_And\\_Crime\\_Clarifying\\_the\\_Cop\\_Killer\\_Controversy.pdf](http://schools.yrdsb.ca/markville.ss/history/honours/Rap_Cops_And_Crime_Clarifying_the_Cop_Killer_Controversy.pdf).

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Paul Delaney, "Amos 'n Andy in Nikes," *The New York Times*, October 10, 1993, accessed November 30, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/1993/10/11/opinion/amos-n-andy-in-nikes.html>.

Gangsta rappers refute these critiques by insisting they tell stories about the realities of their communities and lives. Many rappers state that they tell the stories from the black ghetto, a space that isn't open to the public. Others insist "that not all rap was about pimping and ho-popping; that rap lyrics too can be ironic; that art can be compensatory, not just a simpleton's photo of what happened"<sup>32</sup>. Many critics of gangsta rap argue that the music incites hate and violence. One proponent of this school of thought was Dennis R. Martin, the President of the National Association of Chiefs of Police in 1993. Martin argued that Ice-T's song "Cop Killer" was a "misuse of the First Amendment' because it has been 'implicated in at least two shooting incidents and has inflamed racial tensions in cities across the country'"<sup>33</sup>. Martin believes that gangsta rap music, and specifically "Cop Killer", is responsible for encouraging crimes. However Martin mistakes "Cop Killer" as a rap song when in reality it is a metal song. Martin also ignores the social critique Ice-T is making about the violence that police officers inflict on black communities.

Martin specifically attacks Ice-T's music due to Ice-T's identity as a black man. There have been many songs which mention killing cops, for example Eric Clapton's cover of "I Shot the Sheriff" which peaked at the top of the US music charts, that have not received the backlash Ice-T has received. In "I Shot the Sheriff" "Clapton's white bread portrayal of an armed and heroic Jamaican 'rudeboy' was comfortably abstract and romantic"<sup>34</sup>. However Ice-T's, "shotgun-toting black US gangster is all too concrete, stripped of romantic pretense and lodged uncomfortably in everyday life"<sup>35</sup>. Gangsta rap is feared because it deals with the realities that black communities face. It shows the inconvenient truths of the states of black communities. Their realities deal with poverty, racism, violence, drugs, and so much more. It is through the exploration of these realities that gangsta rappers connect their personal identities with their music.

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<sup>32</sup> Brennan, Tim. 1994. "Off the Gangsta Tip: A Rap Appreciation, or Forgetting About Los Angeles". *Critical Inquiry* 20 (4). University of Chicago Press: 663-93. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343854>. 669

<sup>33</sup> Mark S. Hamm and Jeff Ferrell, "Rap, Cops, and Crime: Clarifying the 'Cop Killer' Controversy," *ACJS Today*, 1994, [http://schools.yrdsb.ca/markville.ss/history/honours/Rap\\_Cops\\_And\\_Crime\\_Clarifying\\_the\\_Cop\\_Killer\\_Controversy.pdf](http://schools.yrdsb.ca/markville.ss/history/honours/Rap_Cops_And_Crime_Clarifying_the_Cop_Killer_Controversy.pdf).

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

## 2

# THE NAME GAME

A lot of brands you can't touch them. When you're dealing with Snoop Dogg, he brings you closer to the brand and it feels like it's a part of you.

– Snoop Dogg

It was the Michael Jordan/Nike phenomenon that really let people see that athletes were ok, and black athletes were ok. Defying a previous wisdom—not only that black athletes wouldn't sell in white America but that the NBA as a predominantly black sport could not sell in white America.

– David Stern

## WINNING FOR AMERICA

The ways in which one's identity is constructed is central to how they are perceived. Identity is the qualities, beliefs, and expressions that separates one person or group from another. One can self identify, deciding how they want to be defined, or identity can be constructed for that person. In the case of sports, where a storyline or endorsement can be central to one's career, their identities are largely reliant on the media and their sponsor companies. For athletes their brand is central to their identity. Sports use their player's brands to sell tickets to games, rivalries, advertisements, and merchandise. It's these storylines, that are based off constructed identities, that engage fans and get them to tune into sports talk show and basketball games.

Prior to the 1992 Olympics, professional basketball players weren't allowed to play on any countries' national team. It had always been a source of pride for the United States that their college basketball teams was able to beat other countries' teams. Sports, and basketball in particular, was supposed to be dominated by the US. The USA men's Olympic basketball team had won 9 out of the last 10 Olympic games, only coming in second in 1972. In 1988 the Summer Olympics were in Seoul, South Korea. The USA men's Olympic basketball team placed third, earning the bronze metal. This was the last time the USA men's Olympic basketball team

would be entirely comprised of college basketball players. The US had created an identity in which they were basketball gods, a super power, and dominate. So when the USA men's Olympic basketball team lost in 1988 this image was shattered.

As the 1988 Olympics were kicking off the Cold War was still in effect. Even though the Cold War was coming to its end, tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union remained high. The United States seemed to be coming out on top towards the end of the Cold War and wanted to carry that domination into the Olympics. So when it was learned that both the Soviet Union and the United States had advanced to the knockout stage in basketball at the Olympics and were in the same section, winning the Olympics became all more important. When the United States faced the Soviet Union in the semifinals of the Olympic knockout stage they were defeated 82 to 76. This was tied with the smallest point total in any of the United States's games during that Olympics, they had otherwise been fairly dominate. This loss to the Soviet Union shook the USA men's Olympic basketball team's confidence. Their identity was built upon them being basketball super powers yet they had fallen to perhaps their biggest rival.

The 1992 Olympics games was the first time the United States used professional basketball players. After America's loss in the 1988 Olympics many cried for professional basketball players to be allowed to be selected for teams. The International Basketball Federation (FIBA) in 1989 passed the proposal that would allow professional basketball players into the Olympics, despite the United States and Russia's votes against the proposal. With this new proposal passed, corporate sponsors flocked to the USA men's Olympic basketball team to advertise their products with the team. The USA men's Olympic basketball team's previous Olympic loss coupled with a new opportunity for immense financial gain heavily influenced the selection for the USA men's Olympic basketball team.

In order for the United States to regain their identity as the dominate basketball super power they had to create a powerful team. While finding the best NBA players was important so was finding players that corporate sponsors would love. The USA men's Olympic basketball team wanted to reserve one spot for a college player to honor the teams that had come before them. This spot went to Christian Laettner who played for Duke University. The first ten players that were selected were Michael Jordan, Scottie Pippen, John Stockton, Karl Malone, Magic Johnson, Larry Bird, Patrick Ewing, Chris Mullin, David Robinson, and Charles Barkley. Larry Bird and Magic Johnson were chosen when they were towards the end of their careers. They had both

endured some health problems, Magic had his struggle with HIV and Larry had back trouble. Although these two players weren't at the height of their careers they had large advertising potential and were idols in the basketball community. Robinson was selected because he was a part of the 1988 team and was given a shot at redemption.

The other players like Ewing, Mullin, Malone, Pippen, and Stockton were in the prime or entering the prime of their careers. The stars of what would later be called the Dream Team were Jordan and Barkley. Jordan was the poster boy for the NBA and thus was a great fit athletically and monetarily. Barkley was known for his strength and determination and was starting to get noticed more by sponsors. Although his selection to the Dream Team came with a bit of controversy because of his physical play, he ended up being the highest scoring player on the team. The final roster spot was between Clyde Drexler and Isiah Thomas. Thomas was a part of the infamous "Bad Boys" Detroit Pistons. This Pistons group was known for their very physical play and, according to some, dirty tactics. During this time period the Pistons had positioned themselves to be a rival against Jordan's Bulls. Thomas left such a bad impression with Jordan that Jordan said he wouldn't play on the Dream Team if Thomas was on it. Of course Jordan brought greater sponsorship opportunities and playing ability than Thomas, so Drexler was chosen for the final USA men's Olympic basketball team spot. The brand identities of the Dream Team players was a significant factor in their selection to the team.

## **MR.23 AND THE AMERICAN DREAM**

Michael Jordan was drafted by the Chicago Bulls in 1984. During his rookie season, Jordan became a force to reckon with within the league. In his rookie season he averaged 28.2 points per game<sup>36</sup>. He was starting to become a fan favorite as he appeared on the cover of Sports Illustrated a month into his rookie season under the heading "A Star Is Born". Similarly to Magic Johnson, Jordan was voted to be an All-Star starter by the fans during his rookie season. Jordan would go on to win the Rookie of the Year award.

Jordan's image embodied the American dream. Jordan went from initially not making his varsity high school basketball team to winning multiple NBA championships and being a NBA star. His determination and work ethic started from a young age. Upon being rejected for the

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<sup>36</sup> "WebCite Query Result," WebCite Query Result, accessed October 20, 2015, <http://www.webcitation.org/5eW2LL8qO>

varsity basketball team Jordan's dream didn't stop. He put in the hard work and had the grit, traits required for one to achieve the American dream, to become a star of the junior varsity team. He was told that he was too short to be effective but on the junior varsity team he put up several 40 point games. The next year he made the varsity roster and as a senior he made the McDonald's All-American Team. In high school, Jordan was only at the beginning of his American dream and the ascension from "rags" to riches.

Michael Jordan's brand identity was the American dream and individualism. Critical to Jordan's continuation of the American dream once he was in the league was his dedication to individualism. The "notion of individuality, so central to contemporary capitalist culture and in particular the American Dream ideology, is crucial to the star phenomenon"<sup>37</sup>. Individualism in the American dream is "exemplified in the independent self-made man who overcomes marginalization or various socio-economic challenges to achieve success"<sup>38</sup>. Jordan valued team success but saw himself as the way for his team to have success. He worked tirelessly upon himself and his game so that he could win, which was the most important thing to him. Of course Jordan knew that his team couldn't count on him alone, he knew basketball was a team sport and takes a group effort to win. However Jordan saw himself as a leader, one that could rely on his teammates but a leader nonetheless. When push came to shove Jordan had no problem being the star of the offense. He didn't shy away from game winning shots or taking on the scoring load. Although Jordan was a great play maker, his style focused on isolation plays and complicated individual moves. Jordan's individualism extended off the basketball court and onto the making of his brand.

Jordan's individualism is exemplified in his promotion of Nike. Nike's promotion of Michael Jordan as Air Jordan played on the magnification of Jordan's individual accolades and talent. In turn, Jordan's promotion of Nike sometimes superseded the intentions of the team. During his first NBA All-Star game as a rookie Jordan decided to wear Air Jordan warmups instead of the standard All-Star warmups. With this move Jordan was privileging his individual brand over the All-Star team's history. This statement "was to Isiah Thomas and Magic Johnson, two black men who were prominent figures in the league at this time, a rejection of their

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<sup>37</sup> Sean Crosson, "From Babe Ruth to Michael Jordan: Affirming the American Dream via the Sports/Film Star," *Kinema: Journal of Film and Audiovisual Media*, no. 42 (Fall 2014), pg. 1

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 8

authority, a dismissal of the dues they had paid”<sup>39</sup>. Some may view this move as selfish but to Jordan it was just a further promotion of his individual brand. This was the type of move that was a “precursor to the dawn of an age when [Jordan] as an individual would come to assume all the attention in the room at any given time”<sup>40</sup>. It was this type of brand consciousness, along with immense talent, that led Jordan to be selected to the Dream Team.

Michael Jordan was one of the faces of the Dream Team because of his marketability. Jordan was not only a national star but he also had international stardom. In a 1992 Chinese survey “schoolchildren ranked him with Zhou Enlai as the two greatest figures in twentieth-century history”<sup>41</sup>. Jordan wasn’t just a basketball player, his image was his brand. His name transcended basketball and became a brand in itself. This was the type of image the Dream Team could capitalize off of with its plethora of sponsors. Jordan’s success had marked him as the all American basketball player. Michael Jordan was marketable to multiple races both domestic and foreign. His inclusion on the Dream Team insured fans of all races would be able to get behind the Dream Team and its journey to glory. Jordan’s brand and sponsors had such great success because they were able to sell aspects of mainstream black popular culture.

In 1988 Michael Jordan did a series of commercials with Spike Lee for Nike. These commercials were comprised of Michael Jordan and Spike Lee’s character Mars Blackmon. Blackmon is one of Lee’s characters that appeared in his film *She’s Gotta Have It* (1986). *She’s Gotta Have It* was a very successful film, especially among black audiences, because it showcased non-stereotypical aspects of black culture. In the film Blackmon is a motor-mouthed basketball obsessed Knick’s fan who happens to love Air Jordan. He dons a Brooklyn hat, big glasses, and a chain that bares his name. He embodies parts of hip hop culture and is easily identified as a popular black figure. In the commercials that Nike aired the majority of camera time is spent on Blackmon rather than Jordan, even Blackmon’s voiceover plays throughout the commercials in parts where his body isn’t physically present. In his own commercials Michael Jordan himself isn’t featured. Rather the commercials are trying to create a connection between the Jordan brand, in this case Air Jordan, and popular black culture, which Mars Blackman represents.

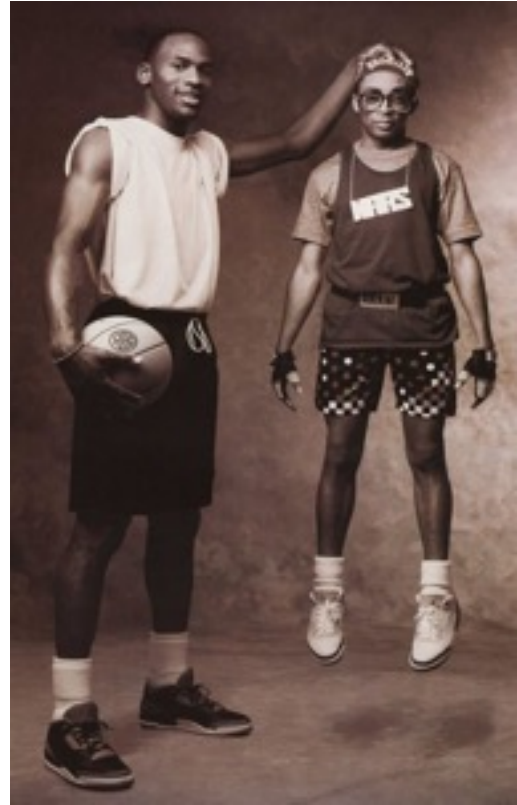
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<sup>39</sup> Todd Boyd, *Young, Black, Rich, and Famous: The Rise of the NBA, the Hip Hop Invasion, and the Transformation of American Culture* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), pg.95

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., pg.95

<sup>41</sup> Sean Crosson, "From Babe Ruth to Michael Jordan: Affirming the American Dream via the Sports/Film Star," *Kinema: Journal of Film and Audiovisual Media*, no. 42 (Fall 2014), pg.8

Nike and Jordan rely upon the identity and recognition of Blackmon to sell his shoes. The commercials don't focus on the look of the shoes and it's performance enhancing claims, but rather the commercials create a narrative that states Air Jordan's are cool because Mars Blackmon likes them. The commercial shows some images of Jordan performing dunks but a large portion of the commercial is spent on close ups of Blackmon's face while he spews off quick catch phrases. In order for this commercial to be effective it relies on the fact that audiences will know who Mars Blackmon is and why he is trust worthy. Blackmon is seen as knowing the ins and outs of what's hip so if he says that Air Jordan's will make you cool then he must be telling the truth. The fact that Nike is relying so heavily on the recognition of a figurative black icon means that they were trying to sell to black audiences and males who have a fascination with black culture.



Michael Jordan and Mars Blackman, Nike ad, 1988

The shoes that Jordan was marketing to black audiences were not affordable for the average black family. These shoes cost hundreds of dollar and yet they were marketed to black audiences whether they be worn for style or for playing purposes. Blackmon's famous line "it's the shoes isn't it" leaves the audience member feeling like the shoes are the key to athletic success. Michael Jordan is a symbol for the American dream and upward mobility and these shoes are marketed as being the starting point for other black men to find their path of success. Nike and Jordan are selling a dream, that these shoes can allow one to dunk or become a better basketball player, that the majority of black audiences couldn't afford. The likely hood of a youth basketball player, regardless of social or economic status, one day playing in the NBA is incredibly low. There are less than 500 spots for a player in the NBA. Someone with aspirations to play in the NBA would not only have to battle current NBA players and their peers for a roster spot, but also international players. The dream that Jordan sells of one being able to practice basketball in their alleyway in Air Jordan and then one day play for the NBA isn't realistic. The shoes don't make or



create the basketball player, but Air Jordan advertises that they can get you one step closer to success. Jordan was a figure for upward mobility and the American dream but only if one buys into a capitalist society.

## THE ROUND MOUND OF REBOUND

Charles Barkley started out his career in a fashion similar to Jordan. Barkley was born and raised in a segregated Leeds, Alabama. When Barkley tried out for his high school varsity team as a junior he was placed as a reserve. At that time Barkley was only a measly 5'10" and weighed around 220 pounds. However during the summer between his junior and senior year Barkley grew to 6'4" and was given a starting position on his high school senior varsity team. Barkley wasn't heavily recruited for college basketball teams, likely due to his weight. An assistant coach for Auburn University, the college he would later attend, described him as "a fat guy...who can play like the wind"<sup>42</sup>. Barkley would attend and play at Auburn for three years. He was known for his rebounding, dunks, and blocked shots.

In the NBA, Charles Barkley is known for his aggressive nature on the court. He had a large stature and was a rebounding machine. His image was based on the fact that he could instill fear in the competition. Whether it was his big elbows flying around trying to grab the rebound or his loud yells, he was a player who was feared and for good reason. Throughout his 16 seasons in the NBA Barkley amassed 329 technical fouls, 11 flagrant fouls, and 6 ejections<sup>43</sup>. He is known for getting in the faces of referees and in fights with several NBA players, several ending with punches thrown. It wasn't just NBA players and referees Barkley went after, he also attacked fans. Barkley has been arrested eight times for punching NBA fans. He was seen as being aggressive, and at times uncontrollable. This is the type of behavior that made his brand have a brute image.

Barkley's brand identity was the image of an aggressive man. His marketability was based on the fear factor he had on others. His brand identity is similar to the image of the brute. The brute is a "fiend, a sociopath, an anti-social menace. Black brutes are depicted as hideous,

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<sup>42</sup> Michael Wilbon, "Barkley: The Great Wide Hope," Washington Post, April 23, 1984, accessed April 13, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/sports/1984/04/23/barkley-the-great-wide-hope/2a499172-1a3a-44ad-bda0-33ab51c9e68f/>.

<sup>43</sup> Charles Barkley Stats," ESPN, accessed February 18, 2016, [http://espn.go.com/nba/player/stats/\\_/id/37/charles-barkley](http://espn.go.com/nba/player/stats/_/id/37/charles-barkley)

terrifying predators”<sup>44</sup>. The image of the brute originated during the radical reconstruction period from 1867-1877. Its purpose was to dehumanize the black man and reenforce why slavery was needed. Slave owners argued that without slavery black people would become animalistic monsters. It was thought that slavery had tamed them from their true savage nature. Slave owners suggested that if black people would be free they would rape and terrorize their white woman. Black people were believed to be hyper sexual due to their savage nature, be well endowed, and masters in the craft of procreation. Even if a black man didn’t look well endowed or like a master in procreation it was believed they could increase their size and powers through voodoo. This fear of sexual violence by black men against white woman often led to lynch mobs. The lynch mobs would come together when there was an accusation of rape, which were often fabricated. Lynchings often included “castration [which] was often employed to symbolize the destruction of the black man’s sexual powers”<sup>45</sup>. Thus eliminating the threat of the black brute. While Barkley doesn’t have the history of sexual violence that is typically associated with the brute, he does have the aspect of an interracial relationship.

Barkley grew up in Leeds, Alabama during segregation. He was the first black baby born in a segregated hospital because his grandfather worked there as a janitor. Months after he was born “four little girls perished when a cache of dynamite exploded beneath the 16th Street Baptist Church”<sup>46</sup> in Alabama. This was the type of violence that was inflicted on black people that would define the Civil Rights Movement. In the 1960s when Barkley was growing up in Leeds the neighborhood was “14 percent black and 79 percent white”<sup>47</sup>. The train tracks divided the white side of town from the black. Barkley was no stranger to racial tensions, especially the tensions that come with being in an interracial marriage.

Charles Barkley married Maureen Blumhardt, a white woman, in 1989. At the time Barkley was playing in Philadelphia for the 76ers. Although Barkley and Blumhardt were in love, some in Philadelphia weren’t in love with their interracial relationship. One man even went as far

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<sup>44</sup> "The Brute Caricature," JCM: The Brute Caricature, accessed November 30, 2015, [http:// www.ferris.edu/news/jimcrow/brute/](http://www.ferris.edu/news/jimcrow/brute/).

<sup>45</sup> "Black Brute," RationalWiki, accessed November 30, 2015, [http://rationalwiki.org/wiki/ Black\\_brute](http://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Black_brute)

<sup>46</sup> Jesse Washington, "Up From Leeds," ESPN, February 12, 2015, accessed October 19, 2015, [http://espn.go.com/espn/feature/story/\\_/id/12289603/how-former-nba-star-charles-barkley-became-role-model](http://espn.go.com/espn/feature/story/_/id/12289603/how-former-nba-star-charles-barkley-became-role-model).

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

as to harass “Maureen for weeks, approaching her in malls and leaving notes on her car”<sup>48</sup>. Others simply gave “disapproving stares and whispers whenever Charles and Maureen were seen together in public”<sup>49</sup>. Barkley didn’t seem to mind, as he has always had thick skin when it came to racial issues. While Barkley has the reputation of being physical and being feared he isn’t regarded as a dirty player. This is one reason he is popular amongst players and fans. Similar to the brute his violence and intimidation can be controlled. For the brute it was slavery that controlled him and the violence he could inflict. For Barkley it was coupling his brute image with the reassuring fact that he is a nice guy that showed audiences that his violence was controllable. The duality of his brand identity was a great selling point in his commercials.



Charles Barkley, Nike ad, 1991

Nike used Barkley’s image of a brute in his shoe commercial in 1991. Nike created an animated cartoon that displayed the dynamics of Barkley’s brute identity. The commercial Nike created was animated and thus was able to show the gross exaggeration of Barkley’s character. The commercial begins with a close up of Barkley’s huge fingers gripped around the basketball. The shot then widens to a huge Barkley with a menacing look on his face. Barkley is portrayed as having crazy eyes with bulging muscles and veins. When Barkley takes his first step we see that his big Nike shoe breaks pieces of the hardwood floor. With every step he

take more and more of the floor breaks away.

Throughout the commercial Barkley has a posture that is reminiscent to the hunchback of Notre Dame, his massive shoulders are hunched over his head, which is disproportionately small. His massive legs, ball, and feet continue to break the court until the camera switches to a shot of the game’s audience. We can tell that Barkley’s shadow is over the audience which is

<sup>48</sup> Ray Didinger, "Just One Big Happy Family Barkley Getting Used To Changes Brought By Marriage, Fatherhood," Philly-archives, June 29, 1989, accessed February 18, 2016, [http://articles.philly.com/1989-06-29/sports/26105115\\_1\\_charles-barkley-marriage-new-town-house](http://articles.philly.com/1989-06-29/sports/26105115_1_charles-barkley-marriage-new-town-house).

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

mainly white and male. The audience with their eyes bulging out of their heads recoil in fear of Barkley. As he marches on towards the basket, Barkley is seen picking up and knocking away defenders who are almost a third of his height and not even close to his size. While he moves away defenders he softly says “pardon me, I’m sorry, excuse me”<sup>50</sup>. Finally we see Barkley size up the basket. His eyes widen and he grunts with a scowl on his face. He looks up, charges towards the basket, and emphatically dunks tearing away the rim from the basket on his way down.

This commercial first emphasizes Barkley’s brute image. It exaggerates his physical features and intimidation. It shows that Barkley is a player to be feared because he is angry and physically imposing. The commercial even suggests that it’s not only players that should fear Barkley but also the audience. The look on the faces of the audience members suggests that Barkley is not only a threat on the court but also off the court. The audience members would have no reason to be fearful if they didn’t think Barkley was just as aggressive and dangerous off the court. So while it would seem that Barkley is a violent man who could strike at any minute and shouldn’t be able to walk the streets, the commercial switches modes and shows that Barkley is controlled and harmless to those not on the court. While he is taking down players left and right he continuously says that he is sorry. He doesn’t mean to cause harm, he is just doing his job. The people in the way are just merely an obstacle to his main target of the rim, which he inflicts his violence upon. Since he is controlled and in a controlled environment he doesn’t inflict his violence upon innocent victims. However his destruction of the rim serves as a reminder of the violence that he can inflict if he is let loose. This commercial shows to opponents that Barkley should be feared because he is violent, but it shows audiences that as long as he is controlled he is no danger to them.

Barkley was a great addition to the Dream Team because he was their enforcer. His dominating and brute like image provided the Dream Team with a monster rebounder and elite scorer. He led the team in scoring, rebounds, and steals. Barkley helped brand the Dream Team as a team that was not meant to be messed with.

While Barkley was perceived by the public based on his brand identity he is a complex person. He wasn't solely defined by his brand identity, he also had a personal identity. Barkley was a jokester, leader, and extremely thoughtful, all things his brand identity couldn't capture.

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<sup>50</sup> 1991 - Nike - Charles Barkley Cartoon," YouTube, 1991, accessed February 18, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oBAPJ5t1Jsk>

While his brand identity is what he is known for, his personal life offers a better look into his complex character.

While Barkley's brand image is an intimidating brute his personality was that of a jokester. He has a very lively and expressive personality and was always quick to playfully insult someone or pull a prank on them. In the 1990s when Barkley still played for the Philadelphia 76ers he and his teammate Rick Mahorn teamed up together to perform a series of pranks on other NBA players. They hosted their own show called *Pro Basketball's Funniest Pranks* and pulled many funny antics. One of their most famous ones is when they pranked Manute Bol<sup>51</sup>. Barkley and Mahorn set out a buffet table and had Mahorn's head hide under one of the dishes. When Bol took the top off the dish Mahorn jumped out and scared him. Another one of their good pranks is when they pranked Dell Curry<sup>52</sup>.



Dell Curry, *Pro Basketball's Funniest Pranks*, 1990

They had him audition to be a spokesperson for their drink "Fill-Er-Up" which was a mix of tabasco sauce, tomato juice, pineapple juice, and cranberry juice. The face Dell made when he took his first swig of the drink is hilarious. This show really showcased Barkley's humorous personality off the court.

Barkley is probably most well known for his "I'm not a role model" ad he created with Nike<sup>53</sup>. In this ad Barkley emphasizes that he is an athlete, not a role model. He is paid to dunk the basketball, reek havoc on the court, and rebound, not raise your kids. He feels that parents should be the role models to their kids, not him. While some heavily critiqued this commercial because they thought Barkley was making light of his social influence, this commercial is very

<sup>51</sup> Swove2204, "Muggsy Bogues & Charles Barkley Prank J.R. Reid Into Thinking He's Been Traded," YouTube, August 02, 2015, accessed April 22, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bi0creNYnvo>.

<sup>52</sup> Swove2204, "Charles Barkley Pranks Dell Curry," YouTube, June 21, 2015, accessed April 22, 2016, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3K\\_KsBPqXGs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3K_KsBPqXGs).

<sup>53</sup> GloopTrekker, "Nike 'I Am Not a Role Model' Commercial W/Charles Barkley - 1993," YouTube, April 13, 2013, accessed April 22, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4gqk4WPnrmM>.

thoughtful. One reason he doesn't want to be looked up to as a role model is because the public doesn't really know him. They know him based on his brand identity and professional career but they don't truly know who he is or what he stands for. Another reason is that it is very unlikely that kids could be him or that most of them would even make it to the NBA. It takes a lot of talent and hard work to play in the NBA but it also takes a bit of luck. Barkley was lucky he grew a couple inches before his high school senior year because this allowed him to play on the varsity team. Kids are better off looking up to their parents because they can teach them valuable life lessons and better shape their future. While Barkley didn't want to be a role model he certainly wanted to be an influential black leader. He wants to help black children, and he does this by teaching kids the value of education, because they all won't end up like him.

## **THE BAD BOYS**

The 1981-94 Detroit Pistons were dubbed the nickname the Bad Boys. The creation of the Bad Boys began with the drafting of Isiah Thomas. He was drafted into the NBA in 1981 to the Pistons. During this year the Pistons also acquired Bill Laimbeer and Vinnie Johnson. These three players created the core of the Bad Boys. For the first five years that this group played together they struggled. The furthest they got was the conference semifinals where they lost to the Boston Celtics. After repeatedly losing in the playoffs in 1984, 1985, and 1986 Piston's coach Chuck Daly and team captain Isiah Thomas decided they needed to make a change. For the 1986-87 season the Pistons decided to take on an identity that was based on an aggressive style of play.

Unlike Barkley, the Detroit Pistons and Isiah Thomas didn't have the benefit of only being seen as threats on the court. It wasn't their competitiveness or aggression that incited fear into their opponents but rather their physical play and dirty tactics. Barkley had the benefit of reassuring audiences that he wasn't a threat because of his personality, a luxury the Pistons didn't have. The Pistons were defined by the way they played and nothing else. During the 1986-87 season the Pistons added key players like John Salley, Dennis Rodman, and Adrian Dantley who would help propel this aggressive style of play. During this season the Pistons made it to the Eastern Conference Finals and the following year made it to the NBA Finals for the first time in 33 years. Although they would go on to lose to the Los Angeles Lakers the Pistons had a rematch against the Lakers in the 1988-89 season at the NBA Finals. In this rematch the Pistons came out

on top, winning in a four-game sweep. In the 1989-90 NBA season the Pistons would go on to be repeat champions but not before facing one of their toughest rivals. In the postseason the Bad Boys were matched up against Michael Jordan's and Scottie Pippen's Chicago Bulls in the Eastern Conference Finals. This series went the full seven games before the Pistons finally defeated the Bulls 93-74. This was the series that cemented Michael Jordan's rocky relationship with Isiah Thomas. When the Bulls and Pistons met again in the Eastern Conference Finals the following season it was the Bulls who came out victorious. At the end of this series the Bad Boys are most famously known for walking off the court in defeat before the game ended without sharing the Bulls players' hands.

The Bad Boys earned their nickname because of the way they played. They were known for doing anything and everything to win. While some might associate doing anything to win with putting in hard work, the Bad Boys were "willing to transgress the norm of sportsmanship— to be unsportsmanlike in order to gain an advantage"<sup>54</sup>. Whether this meant extra hard fouls or engaging in fights the Bad Boys were always able to frustrate their opposition. Their aggressive play threw other teams off their game while the Pistons themselves kept on rolling. The Bad Boys reveled and embraced their new found nickname making it their mantra to play like the old Oakland Raiders, who were known for fighting. They even went as far as to practice "in black jerseys - complete with skull and crossbones - [that were] given to them personally by Oakland Raiders owner Al Davis"<sup>55</sup>. The Bad Boys nickname was just as much about their attitude as it was about their style of play. Of course the Bad Boys weren't actually bad, they were a winning basketball team. So while they might have been hated because of their brand identity their games always generated a lot of excitement. The marketing that happened around the Bad Boys drew a lot of interest for the NBA because audiences flocked to see their games.

While the Bad Boys brand identity was great domestically it was not the identity the USA men's Olympic basketball team wanted to promote internationally. The United States wanted to project the national team's identity as based on teamwork and cooperation. While Isiah Thomas was a very good basketball player who was very nice and soft spoken his identity was tied to the Bad Boys. His addition to the USA men's Olympic basketball team would have created turmoil

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<sup>54</sup> Benjamin Morris, "Just How Bad Were the 'Bad Boys'?", FiveThirtyEight, April 15, 2014, accessed February 18, 2016, <http://fivethirtyeight.com/features/just-how-bad-were-the-bad-boys/#fn-6>

<sup>55</sup> Motor City Bad Boys: The 1989-1990 Back to Back World Champion Detroit Pistons," Motor City Bad Boys: The 1989-1990 Back to Back World Champion Detroit Pistons, accessed February 18, 2016, <http://www.motorcitybadboys.com/index.php>.

within the team and sent a message to other nation's teams that the US wasn't above playing "dirty". They wanted to have the brand identity as the superpower of basketball, not the team that cheated their way to a gold medal. The Bad Boys had created a brand identity that was normally reserved for rappers. Rappers were seen as tough, violent, and overall dangerous. These were qualities that the Bad Boys embodied and ones USA men's Olympic basketball team wanted to distance themselves from.

## THESE GHETTO STREETS

The ghetto has always been undesired. The Reagan and Bush administrations presented "poor black communities as 'dangerous' and 'dependent' [because it] helped consolidate the white, rightward-realigning political imagination"<sup>56</sup>. The word "ghetto" sought out to other black communities and present them as something to be feared. The use of the media furthered in othering black communities. The nightly news aired images and stories of murder, drugs, gangs, and violence about the ghettos. The news "presented a heavily edited version of urban living, inserting stock segments like sirens and police warnings into their sensational and highly subjective narratives"<sup>57</sup>. Instead of running from these narratives gangsta rappers embraced the identity of the ghetto.

Gangsta rap's identity laid in the world around it. In the late 1970s through the 1980s the economy in southern Los Angeles suffered. Unemployment rose for semiskilled workers and poverty grew in impoverished areas. Blue-collar jobs were either moving to the suburbs or overseas leaving a void in poor inner-city communities. Between 1979 and 1989 the percent of black people who lived at or below the poverty line rose from 13.8 to 36.7 percent<sup>58</sup>. Due to the "dramatic increases in poverty, economic polarization, and dead-end, service-sector work, attended by rising levels of gun violence, drug use, policing, and imprisonment"<sup>59</sup> there were few opportunities for black youth to have jobs. While unemployment in semiskilled and manufacturing jobs was rising the service industry was booming. Workers who had previously

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<sup>56</sup> Eithne Quinn, *Nuthin' but a "G" Thang: The Culture and Commerce of Gangsta Rap* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), pg.66.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, pg.75.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, pg.43.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, pg.42.



held semiskilled jobs like mechanics were forced to take low paid part-time jobs like janitors, street vendors, and security guards.

Snoop Dogg, a gangsta rapper, himself was forced to take a job bagging groceries at a supermarket. Snoop complained that it “was what they call an ‘entry-level position’ without ever telling you that there isn’t but one level”<sup>60</sup>. While semiskilled jobs were disappearing, high-skill jobs were being created in high numbers. Industries like software, finance, and entertainment created opportunities for high-salaried workers. This bifurcation in employment was reflective of the policies “the Reagan and Bush administrations put into place sweeping deregulatory and fiscal policies that helped instigate an almost unprecedented redistribution of wealth to the top quintile of the population”<sup>61</sup>. The lack of skilled good paying jobs left most black southern Los Angeles youth with three options: sell drugs, be in a gang, or make rap music. The lack of good jobs for black youth without college degrees coupled with communities ravished by crack and a growing black male prison population left for any interesting outlook of the ghetto.

It was the war on drugs and mass incarceration that had a big effect on the ghetto. The outlandish mandatory sentencing for crack users, thanks to the Reagan and Bush administrations, led to the destruction of black male youth in the ghetto. Snoop Dogg, who was arrested on crack charges, described jail as “a vicious circle, a revolving door, and after a while the line between being in and out gets real blurry and all you know for sure is that you’re serving time, one way or the other”<sup>62</sup>. The mass incarceration and mandatory crack sentences weren’t changing the drug culture but rather creating a vicious prison cycle. People in these communities felt that “the war on poverty became a war against the urban poor, a promulgation of law and order that militarized the local (and federal) police in a struggle against drugs, gangs, crime, illegal immigrants, and other inner-city targets”<sup>63</sup>. Those living in the ghettos decided to fight back with gangsta rap.

Gangsta rappers used the ghetto in their songs to create politically charged music and/or to describe their surroundings while profiting off of the sensationalism with the ghetto. Rap groups and rappers like Ice Cube, N.W.A, and Ice-T used the issues going on within their

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., pg.43.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., pg.44.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., pg.47.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., pg.48.

communities to voice their political opinions. In their raps they would address, police brutality, their dislike for Reagan and an intrusive government, and the crack epidemic. They would also go as far as to explain why their communities are devastated, namely because of a lack of employment opportunities, racism, and a system that is designed to profit off of their pain. Gangsta rappers “continually elaborated highly appealing and marketable expressions of authentic place-bound identity (‘live from the ghetto’)”<sup>64</sup> while simultaneously complicating and criticizing the structures that drove such expressions. While some gangsta rappers were using the ghetto to create politically charged songs other rappers used it to base their identity and describe their lives.

Snoop Dogg and Dr. Dre were the pioneers in gangsta-funk (G-funk). G-funk, which started to emerge in the early 1990s, was laid-back. It combined “‘low metabolism’ sounds and lifestyle images [to communicate] a posture of increasing alienated complacency”<sup>65</sup>. This type of gangsta rap was popular because of “the innovative combination of amoral and secular rhymes with seductive instrumentation and soft, southern-tinged vocalization”<sup>66</sup>. G-funk rappers through a smooth laid back beat expressed their identities through their lives in the ghetto.

Snoop Dogg’s first solo album *Doggystyle* describes his life in the ghetto of Long Beach, California. In Snoop’s song “Who am I (What’s My name)” he introduces music fans to his life and daily activities. He starts out the song by using clever word play to state that he is a crip from Long Beach that deals crack (“from the depths of the sea back to the block/long beach is the spot where I serve my ‘caine”). Throughout the song he makes references to his drug habits, relationships with women, and even the violence he can inflict on those who cross him, including police. Snoop states that he buys weed (“I got five on that twenty sack”), sleeps with a lot of women because he has a large penis (“she want the nigga with the biggest nuts, and guess what/ he is I and I am him”), and that he isn’t afraid to murder a cop or kill bloods (“Mr. one eight seven on a motherfuckin cop/ robbin' motherfuckers then I kill dem blood clots”). He uses these three aspects of his life, drugs, women, and violence, to define himself as a gangsta.

Snoop also makes repeated references to Dr. Dre on “Who am I (What’s My name)”. Through N.W.A. Dr. Dre has become affiliated with Compton and southern Los Angeles. Snoop

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., pg.67.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., pg.144.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., pg.146.

Dogg started his career by featuring on a couple of songs from Dr. Dre's solo album *The Chronic*. Dr. Dre also produced and featured on songs from Snoop's *Doggystyle* album. Snoop's references to Dr. Dre are to remind the listeners that he has worked with one of the best but also to remind them that his identity lays with southern Los Angeles. Dr. Dre is one of the biggest faces for southern L.A in gangsta rap so by Snoop attaching himself and his name to Dr. Dre he connects his identity with southern L.A. The music video for "Who am I (What's My name)" further establishes Snoop's identification with southern L.A.

The music video starts off in a neighborhood similar to those in *Boyz n the Hood* (1991). This is a classic film that introduced much of America to the life of black male youth in a South Central Los Angeles ghetto. The neighborhood in Snoop's video is similar to that of the film's protagonist. The grass is cut short, there are single story houses, and children can be heard in the background. The rest of music video shows scenes of Snoop and his friends going around town. They can be seen running through an abandoned landscape, hanging out in south L.A. river banks, partying in a club, ruining a family picnic, and on top and around a record store that identifies itself as being in Long Beach. These are all places that black people might frequent and are recognizable to those who live in southern L.A. This is the song in which Snoop is establishing his identity. He repeats his name a number of times in the song because he wants listeners to listen and know who he is. The imagery and lyrics he uses in his music video establish southern L.A. as being central to his identity.

Gangsta rappers locating their identities in their homes in their music is how they connect their personal identities with the larger public. The ghetto is a shared community, one



Snoop Dogg, "Who am I (What's My Name)", 1993

that thrives on connection. Whether it be through massive block parties, cook outs, large social gatherings, or use of public spaces, parts of the community come together. One of the most popular places in the ghetto is the basketball court. The pickup games, tournaments, and competitions all create bonding opportunities between those in a shared community. Gangsta rappers who localize their identities and music in their communities call on these shared spaces to connect with the listener. Those who live in or are from southern L.A. might recognize the places Snoop Dogg lists and feel as if they have a shared connection with him. He portrays himself to be just like the listeners, going to the same places, hanging out at the same spots, doing the same things. His personal identity is rooted in the ghetto. He isn't as concerned with how he brands himself because his brand is his personal identity. This differs greatly from basketball players who must protect their brand identities and how they are marketed to the public because they are putting out an image that is separate from their personal identity.

## 3

## THE MONEY GAME

We were like the Beatles. We were like rock stars.

– Patrick Ewing on the Dream Team

### LIGHTS, CAMERA, ACTION

The 1992 Olympic games was an advertising goldmine for the U.S Men's Basketball team and advertisers. There were 15 companies that bought a piece of the Dream Team, whether it was being the official trading card or drink of the Dream Team, everyone wanted to cash in.

Advertisers were looking to capitalize off the brand identities of players like Michael Jordan, Magic Johnson, Charles Barkley, Patrick Ewing, and Larry Bird. The 15 companies that became official sponsors of the Dream Team invested a total of \$100 million<sup>67</sup>. NBC itself invested \$550 million-plus in the Olympics, hoping to get a large return from the ratings for the Dream Team games<sup>68</sup>. While most saw this type of advertising interest as a good sign others thought it might send the wrong message.

During the Tournament of America the Dream Team outscored their opponents by upwards of 70 points. This large margin of victory combined with advertisements that boasted America superiority made people concerned that America would be portrayed as bullies during the Olympics. While some argued this was intentional and would only help the Dream Team, others felt it opposed what the Olympics are all about. The Olympics are thought to be about “competition and sportsmanship...they should not be about the ‘Ugly American’ blowing everyone off the face of the earth”<sup>69</sup>. This whole approach could have backfired for advertisers.

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<sup>67</sup> Glen Macnow, "They're Ready To Dunk For Dollars For The Dream Team And Its Sponsors, There's Gold In Them Thar Games," Philly-archives, July 18, 1992, accessed February 20, 2016, [http://articles.philly.com/1992-07-18/news/26025321\\_1\\_dream-team-olympic-glory-usa-basketball](http://articles.philly.com/1992-07-18/news/26025321_1_dream-team-olympic-glory-usa-basketball).

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.,

If the Dream Team kept blowing teams out of the water during the Olympics it is reasonable to believe fewer people will tune in to watch a game that isn't competitive. Even Christian Laettner, a member of the Dream Team, thought "the fans will be bored as hell watching [them]"<sup>70</sup>.

Olympic Basketball had traditionally been about amateur players doing their best to imitate professionals, represent their countries, and be competitive. After all 1992 was the first year NBA players were allowed to represent their countries in the Olympics. The brand identity of the Dream Team was based on fear, domination, and intimidation. The advertisers for the Dream Team showcased this brand identity by using images of aggressive black men and dunking.

The act of dunking has been marked as aggressive and showboating. The dunk is one of the most exiting plays in basketball. However it hasn't always been viewed this way. Some people like to think of basketball as a methodical cerebral team sport. A team sport that takes a lot of precision to score and teamwork to defend. The dunk is almost the complete opposite of this style of play. The dunk is emphatic, impactful, surprising, and exciting. However some feel that it takes away from the flow of the game. In the 1967-76 seasons the NCAA banned dunking. The then UCLA junior Kareem Abdul-Jabbar thought that "the dunk [was] one of basketball's great crowd pleasers, and there [was] no good reason to give it up except that this and other niggers were running away with the sport"<sup>71</sup>. During this time the dunk was just beginning to evolve and create its meaning within the game. The dunk continued to develop along side the increasingly violent and aggressive play that dominated the late 1980s and early 1990s. During this time period the dunk took on new meanings of violence and emasculation that are still present in today's game.

The style in which players dunked became more aggressive and violent during the 1980s. Dunking stopped looking graceful and became about breaking the glass backboard, hanging off the rim, loud screams, gloating, and chest pounding. The vernacular that was used to describe dunks was also violent. A dunker would be described as having slammed, thrown, crushed, and hammered down the ball on their opponent. Dunking started to take on a meaning of dominating an opponent and rubbing their face in it. In 1988, a University of Pittsburgh junior Jerome Lane dunked with such force that the glass shattered and scattered everywhere, but the

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Todd Boyd and Kenneth L. Shropshire, *Basketball Jones: America above the Rim* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), pg. 152

reaction from him and his teammates were the most telling. Instead of “a look of astonishment or even gravity, Lane strutted around his team’s bench, ‘high-fiving’ his Pitt teammates”<sup>72</sup>. Breaking the glass wasn’t embarrassing or concerning but rather an invitation to an exclusive club of powerful men.

One of the most famous powerful dunkers was 76er’s Darryl “Chocolate Thunder, Dawkins. He is most remembered for breaking 2 backboards dunking within 21 days of each other. The victim of one of his dunks, Bill Robinzine, forever had his name immortalized in a poem describing Dawkins. In the poem Dawkins is described as “Chocolate Thunder Flying, Robinzine Crying, Teeth Shaking, Glass Breaking, Rump Roasting, Wham Bam, Glass Breaker I am Jam”<sup>73</sup>. Not only was it embarrassing for Robinzine to be dunked on but he is also remembered as crying about it, an effeminate quality in that situation. Dunking wasn’t just about puffing up one’s status but also making your opponent feel less than. Players would “stick figures in guys’ faces [after dunking] while millions [were] watching on TV, which [was] an embarrassment [and] almost a challenge to one’s manhood”<sup>74</sup>. This type of behavior and dunking style found its home on the larger platform of the NBA.

The NBA was able to market dunking on multiple platforms. There were highlight reels dedicated solely to dunks, posters of great dunks and people being dunked on, and the dunk contest on All-Star weekend. All of these marketing opportunities are made possible because of the “cool factor” dunking possess. Aside from the stereotypical reasons, such as black men can jump higher due to genetics, the “cool factor/pose” is a possible reason why dunking is a black thing. Although dunking is negatively seen as a selfish play because it focuses on a single player, a quality that is stereotypically associated with black players, it is the “cool factor/poses” of the individual that drives its marketability. The “cool factor/poses” involves “the construction of a symbolic universe. Denied access to mainstream avenues of success, [young black men] have created their own voice. Unique patterns of speech, walk, and demeanor express the cool pose”<sup>75</sup>. When black players are able to use the “cool pose” they are able to express themselves,

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<sup>72</sup> Todd Boyd and Kenneth L. Shropshire, *Basketball Jones: America above the Rim* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), pg. 154

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., pg.154

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., pg.155

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., pg.157

regardless if society approves. It is because dunking brings attention to the self that black men are able to express their individualism and identity. The notion that dunking is a black thing because of its aggressive and violent meaning is dangerous because it paints black men as inherently aggressive. The U.S. Men's Basketball team used images of their black players dunking in their pre-Olympic commercials in order to display an image of American dominance on an international front.

McDonalds ran several ads in 1992 that advertised a special gold medal meal to prepare for the Olympics. These ads feature Michael Jordan, Patrick Ewing, and Chris Mullin. In one of these commercials these three players boast about their preparedness for the Olympics<sup>76</sup>. The commercial begins with Mullin and Ewing stating that if you are hungry for gold you need to practice. Their advice plays over images of Ewing attempting to dunk. He attempts three times, missing once but hanging onto the rim when he completes the other two. Although Ewing isn't dunking incredibly forcefully the echoing of his voice saying practice and the camera movement try to make the dunk more exciting. Jordan then goes on to talk about how one can get a burger for a big guy like him, to which Ewing replies "Big guy, Mikey"? At the end of the commercial Mullin and Ewing do a clever play on words stating "gold medal? It's in the bag".

This commercial places a large importance on practice as being the key to winning, but only in an individualist sort of way. Instead of showing members of the Dream Team running drills or practicing shots, McDonalds chose to show Ewing repeatedly dunking. This not only suggests that the Dream Team don't have to practice the fundamentals, instead they focus on showboating dunks, but it also suggests that they plan to emasculate and embarrass their opponents. It is significant that Ewing, a black man, is doing the dunking rather than Mullin, a white man. It also serves to enforce the stereotype of dunking as a black thing. It is interesting to note that Mullin is barely involved in the commercial. He only appears at the beginning and the end and has very little to do or say. This commercial, much like the Dream Team, is dominated by its black stars. The very end of the commercial, "its in the bag", reiterates that the Olympics is going to be a cake walk for the Dream Team. McDonalds wasn't the only sponsor that used the black image to show dominance internationally.

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<sup>76</sup> "McDonald's Commercial Featuring The 1992 Dream Team," YouTube, March 11, 2014, accessed January 31, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E43vWJkLclK>.





Ticket window man, Visa ad, 1992

A Visa commercial uses game footage of the members of the Dream Team to create a simile between the Dream Team and Visa. The commercial starts out with introducing the players as being called the greatest team in Olympic history. One by one

the narrator says the names of the star players for the Dream Team: Bird, Jordan, Johnson, Ewing, Barkley, Stockton, Robinson, Pippen, Mullin, and Malone<sup>77</sup>. When each name is said there is an accompanying shot of them performing some basketball move. The narrator then says that if the audience should think they, the Dream Team, are tough wait until we see the guys at the ticket window if we don't have our Visa card. The narrator says the Olympics don't take American Express with accompanying shots of Dream Team members blocking balls. Finally the narrator ends by saying Visa is everywhere you want to be accompanied by the visual of Larry Bird nailing a tough shot.

Visa is trying to link the dominance of the Dream Team members with the dominance of Visa. The narrator first primes the viewer to think of the Dream Team as dominate by showing images in which the players are being forceful, gritty, and successful. These images include dunks, off balance shots, and off balance passes. The viewer is supposed to view the Dream Team as tough because we are seeing them be dominate. However, the narrator tells us, that this tough Dream Team is nothing compared to the guys at the ticket window if you are even seen with a card that isn't Visa. As soon as your Visa card is flashed showing your dominance the ticket guys back off. Images of the Dream Team blocking shots follows while the narrator is saying "because once again the Olympics don't take American Express". The combination of his words with these images suggests to the viewer that the way the Dream Team is going to dominate the Olympics is the same way Visa dominates American Express. The Dream Team is symbolically blocking American Express from the Olympics.

The commercial relied upon images of black men to send its message and theme of dominance. These images were meant to show the aggressive and dominate play the Dream

<sup>77</sup> "1992 - Visa - Dream Team," YouTube, June 22, 2008, accessed January 31, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F3cRbg2RbGk>.

Team was going to bring to the Olympics. When each player is getting their name called it is only the black players that are making aggressive moves. Jordan is shown dunking, Johnson is beating his man to make a layup, Ewing is dunking over someone, Barkley is swatting a ball away, Robinson is grabbing a rebound in traffic, Pippen is in the aftermath of dunking, Malone is grabbing a rebound and about to go up for a jam. After this there are two more images of black players dunking and blocking the ball. Ewing is then shown punching the camera followed by Barkley angrily hitting/squeezing the ball. All of the ending shots in the commercial of players blocking balls and dunk attempts are performed by black players. Conversely the images of Stockton, Bird, and Mullin are of them passing the ball, taking a fade away shot, or shooting a three.

These images are once again confirming the notion that black men are angry, aggressive, and showboaters. They are being used as the face of dominance which can be positive however this dominance is shown in the form of violent and aggressive basketball moves. This commercial not only suggests that the black members of the Dream Team will be dominate but also that they should be feared. This fear extends beyond the basketball court and Olympics because the narrator stresses that the players themselves are tough, not just their style of play. They are the “ugly Americans” who are bullies and beat up on their competitors. This image of the “ugly American” was also present in a Nike commercial.

Nike’s Dream Team cartoon showed a gross over exaggeration of American strength. The five Dream Team members who are in this cartoon were signed to Nike. The cartoon is set to lovely Spanish music consisting of a mandolin<sup>78</sup>. The music is light and let’s the audience know that this cartoon is set in Barcelona, the home of the 1992 Olympics. The cartoon starts with Jordan quickly looking at a map that says “map de Barcelona”. The camera then cuts to John Stockton spinning the basketball around with his bigger white opponents on top. Next is David Robinson who takes on his extremely large white opponent who morphs into a large angry bull. Chris Mullin then passes the ball over outreached hands. Scottie Pippen gracefully floats around and then softly dunks the ball while saying gracias. Finally Charles Barkley drops down from the sky and incoherently yells at the camera with spit and drool falling out of his mouth. All five men then come to face the screen while roses gracefully fall. When the Nike slogan “just do it

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<sup>78</sup> "NIKE TEAM USA 1992," YouTube, September 11, 2014, accessed January 31, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UIdvhVAM30>.



Dream Team, Nike ad, 1992

U.S.A.” appears there is a single rose on the ground that follows that gets crushed by a big American foot.

This Nike commercial uses Barkley’s brand image to insight fear in America’s competition. Throughout his time in the NBA Barkley gained a reputation of being a physical big man. He matched his physical play with an uncensored mouth and was known for getting technical fouls. His on court behavior would lead the casual NBA viewer to believe Barkley is mean spirited and villainous. In the commercial Nike chose to over exaggerate Barkley’s brand identity by creating the image of an angry and aggressive black man.

In the Nike commercial Barkley’s cartoon character is akin to a rabid dog. During his character’s part in the commercial he is barking with spit falling out of his mouth. This image is intended to insight fear into the Dream Teams opponents by showing them a player who is eager to destroy them when they play. It is

Barkley’s aggression that other opponents should fear. Barkley is the only one in the commercial who is painted as animalistic. This portrayal of Barkley suggests that he will be the bite of the team. The one who is geared up and ready to fight or aggressively take on any challenge. There is some truth to this. Grant Hill, a then NBA player, thought Barkley “did the things that you kind of want to do but don’t have the

gull”<sup>79</sup>. However with Nike offering only a brief glimpse into the complicated persona of Barkley they did him a disservice. The animalistic nature of his character portrays him as an inherently dangerous and angry black man. It does not show his hard work at becoming a great rebounder, shooter, or leader. It doesn’t showcase these qualities which make him great. Rather it suggests that his aggressive attitude is innate and that his blackness should be feared.

In these commercials it is the Dream Team player’s brand identities that are used to market a brand identity for the Dream Team. The brand identities of players people know and love are being utilized to sell the public products and more importantly the Olympics. The reliance on player’s brand identities, particularly black players, becomes problematic when stereotypical and racist images are used. These images not only impact player’s brand identities but also how black people are generally perceived. If people, especially people who don’t have numerous encounters with black people, consistently see image of aggressive black men on tv they might infer that’s the demeanor of the everyday black men.

## **SUBURBAN WANNABE GANGSTA**

While hip hop and gangsta rap are identified as black music the largest consumers of these genres are white suburban teens. White people’s fascination with black culture can find its roots in blackface and minstrel shows. The white performers who would apply burt cork, greasepaint, or shoe polish to their bodies to become black in that moment did so so they could express themselves. Black people were seen as being carefree and expressive in their dancing, singing, and mannerisms. White people performed blackface in order to release themselves and become entertainers to the highest degree while executing racist stereotypes. It is this obsession with being black and consuming black culture that continued through radio, television, and music. Hip hop and gangsta rap are largely consumed by white suburban teens partly because it is marketed towards them.

Run-DMC was one of the first hip hop groups to market to mass white audiences. What separated Run-DMC from other rap groups before them was the fact “they were solidly middle class. Both of Run’s parents were college-educated. DMC was a good Catholic schoolkid... neither of them was deprived and neither of them ever ran with a gang, but on stage they

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<sup>79</sup> David DuPree, "NBA.com: You're a Good Man, Charles Barkley!", NBA.com: You're a Good Man, Charles Barkley!, April 2000, accessed January 31, 2016, [http://www.nba.com/encyclopedia/barkley\\_hoopiss5volXXVII.html](http://www.nba.com/encyclopedia/barkley_hoopiss5volXXVII.html).

became the biggest, baddest, streetest guys in the world”<sup>80</sup>. They were able to be crossover artists because they didn’t look like your “typical” hip hop artists but they still had a street presence and persona. They were badasses without having to be bad.

Run-DMC’s big break into the mainstream came from their interpretation of Aerosmith’s “Walk This Way”. They sold “3.3 million copies and demonstrated to both artists and producers that rap was not just a passing phase”<sup>81</sup>. Rick Rubin, Def Jam Records co-founder and producer, said Run-DMC “looked at that ghetto life like a cowboy movie...[they] could talk about those things because they weren’t that close to home”<sup>82</sup>. An inside look into the ghetto is what widespread white audiences were craving and Run-DMC delivered this in a rapid-fire and dynamic style. White suburban people were able to consume black culture without facing the perils of being black. This paradox can be seen in the way break dancing was marketed. For ghetto youths who performed on city streets and shopping malls they were met with banishment and police. However suburban middle-class housewives were learning how to break dance in their spare time at local facilities. Music based television shows aimed to capitalize off of suburban white teens. *Yo! MTV Raps* was a television show that became the place white suburbs would go to for rap music. Their audience consisted of “primarily white, male suburban, and [was] between the ages of 16 and 24”<sup>83</sup>. The show played an array of artists from Ice-T to Vanilla Ice. *Yo! MTV Raps* helped introduce rap to suburban teens and expand its audience.

The problem with the suburb’s consumption of hip hop and gangsta rap is two fold. The first problem is that because these genres are associated with black men they are deemed unsafe by suburban parents. It is seen as a “practice that started in urban America but is infecting the morals and family values of suburban teens”<sup>84</sup>. Parents feel that the lyrics and subject matters corrupt their children. It’s not just the music parents are concerned about. Their children also adopt hip hop’s style and language. Parents are fearful that their children will become criminals and overall disrespectful. All of this they believe is linked to hip hop and gangsta rap music.

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<sup>80</sup> Mark Anthony. Neal and Murray Forman, *That's the Joint!: The Hip-hop Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004), accessed April 21, 2016, [http://sites.psu.edu/comm292/wp-content/uploads/sites/5180/2014/10/FormanNeal-That's\\_the\\_Joint\\_The\\_Hip\\_Hop\\_Studies\\_Readerbook.pdf#page=176](http://sites.psu.edu/comm292/wp-content/uploads/sites/5180/2014/10/FormanNeal-That's_the_Joint_The_Hip_Hop_Studies_Readerbook.pdf#page=176), pg.149

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., pg.499

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., pg.139

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., pg.152

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., pg.159

Parents ignore that artist, songs, and lyrics that are about political injustices, oppression of black people, and songs that are generally uplifting. Instead they oversimplify hip hop and gangsta rap to be about sex, drugs, and misogyny. They put artists into a pigeonhole and don't consider artists to be multifaceted. This same problem appears when people racially stereotype black men. Those who don't have many interactions with black men see or hear negative stories about them on the news and lump them all together.

The second problem with the suburb's consumption of hip hop and gangsta rap is that it is a touristic gaze. Hip hop and "gangsta rap [attracts] listeners for whom the "ghetto" is a place of adventure, unbridled violence, erotic fantasy, and/or an imaginary alternative to suburban boredom"<sup>85</sup>. It provides a voice that white suburbanites are unfamiliar with and one that is isolated from mainstream society. It's not that white suburban teens that like hip hop and gangster rap because of it's sound that are in the wrong. Rather it's those that love these genres because in the moments they are listening to the music, wearing the clothes, or speaking the slang they are able to temporarily be black and experience blackness. It is a modern day version of blackface because once they turn off the music, take off the clothes, or stop speaking in ebonics they are able to be white and privileged again. It is the image of blackness "a foreign, sexually charged, and criminal underworld against which the norms of white society are defined, and, by extension, through which they may be defied"<sup>86</sup> that makes hip hop and gangsta rap appeal to suburban white teens.

White suburban teens also feel that by listening to hip hop and gangsta rap that they have connected with black culture. It is "the feeling that by buying records they have made some kind of valid social commitment" that is dangerous. Listening and buying a song in which a rap artist describes the horrors of the ghetto or the systematic racism they face doesn't make one an activist. Listening to rap songs doesn't mean one is socially aware or conscious to the problems minorities face but for white suburban teens it can feel that way because while they listen to the song they are living a fantasy. They live the fantasy of a black inner-city teenager from the ghetto. For white suburban teens listening to rap songs is "like going to an amusement park and getting on a roller coaster ride—records are safe, they're controlled fear, and you always have the choice

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., pg.131

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., pg.148

of turning it off”<sup>87</sup>. If these rap songs, which can include a lot of violent expressions, are the only way one interacts with and consumes black culture then it becomes more mundane to “watch young black men [kill] each other: in movies, on records, and on the streets of cities and towns across the country”<sup>88</sup>. The burden isn’t on hip hop or gangsta rap to have less violent lyrics, rather the burden is on white suburban teens to interact with black culture in more ways than music or entertainment. Otherwise the violence against black men will be normalized.

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 153

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 153



# THE PAIN GAME

## THE BEATING SEEN AROUND THE NATION

On March 3, 1991 Rodney King, an L.A. taxi driver, was involved in a high-speed car chase with the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD). When the chase ended and King got out of his car four officers surrounded him and repeatedly struck him while he lay defenseless on the ground. While police brutality in L.A. was not unique this incident received national attention because it was filmed by a bystander. The four officers that surrounded King were charged with assault with a deadly weapon and use of excessive force. All of the officers were acquitted for assault with a deadly weapon and acquitted at the state level for use of excessive force.

The Rodney King beating shocked the world because so many had never witnessed police violence on this level. However police violence and brutality isn't something that was new to black communities. They have long bared the unjust blunt of excessive force by the police. The only difference this time was that there was video evidence of the violence that was shown around the country. The people "who didn't grow up black and poor couldn't understand why it happened. You can live in a different part of L.A. and never understand the frustration"<sup>89</sup>. While the video evidence was extremely impactful in the mind of the public it was the acquittal of the officers that had a larger impact.

On April 29, 1992 violence erupted in the streets of Los Angeles after the officers in the Rodney King trial were acquitted. Violence first erupted in South-Central Los Angeles at the corner of Florence Boulevard and Normandie. People were yelling in the streets, hitting cars with objects, looting stores, and protesting. The most famous incident from these riots was the beating

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<sup>89</sup> Ernest Hardy and August Brown, "Los Angeles Riots: Gangsta Rap Foretold Them and Grew after Them," Los Angeles Times, May 02, 2012, accessed February 01, 2016, <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/may/02/entertainment/la-et-riot-music-20120503>



of Reginald Denny. Denny was a white truck driver who was forced from his car and beaten during the riots. The police during the riots were slow to respond and a large amount of damage incurred. The riots in South-Central were not under control until May 1st once military troops entered the area. During the three days of rioting 55 people were killed, almost 2,000 people were injured, 7,000 people were arrested, and nearly \$1 billion worth of property was damaged which included nearly 4,000 buildings that were burned down<sup>90</sup>. Black communities were angry about police brutality and the daily injustices black communities face. They were looking for those with a larger platform to spread their message and create change.

The Rodney King beating and L.A. riots happened months before the first olympic game for the USA. Although the Dream Team was comprised of mostly black players, very few players chose to comment on these two issues. The Olympics would have been a great platform to discuss issues that are affecting black communities, especially since a high profile case and large riot recently happened. Addressing the King beating and L.A. riots at the Olympics would have created an opportunity for international education about systematic racism and black oppression in America. It also would have reaffirmed black communities that their voices were being heard. However members of the Dream Team remained adamant that it wasn't their job to provide commentary on political issues. While some players abstained from commenting for endorsement concerns other simply didn't want to be looked at as a leader or role model. Conversely L.A. based gangsta rappers took these opportunities to voice their political opinions and highlight the troubles that exist in black communities. The Dream Team members were concerned about damaging their brand identities while L.A. gangsta rappers were concerned about helping their communities in their time of need.

Michael Jordan abstained from commenting on Rodney King or the L.A. riots. He didn't want to share his political opinion, whether liberal or conservative leaning, on the issues that were so prevalent in black communities. In this time of turmoil Jordan had one of the biggest stages to state his opinion. He could have shown an international audience that racism is still a big obstacle in America, and that although he as a black man is being asked to represent his country those in his community aren't being treated equally. Most importantly it could have provided support to black communities and reassurance that the most famous black man at that time cared. When

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<sup>90</sup> "Riots Erupt in Los Angeles," History.com, accessed February 01, 2016, <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/riots-erupt-in-los-angeles>.

Jordan was asked about the L.A. riots he simply replied “I need to know more about it”<sup>91</sup>. His statement is his way of dodging the question but not taking a political stance one way or another. He didn’t want to lose the monetary support from either side of this issue. So he remained neutral so that his brand could prosper. This of course isn’t the first time Jordan has refused to give or share his social/political opinion.

In 1990 Michael Jordan declined to endorse a black candidate in a tight Senate race for North Carolina. The two men who were vying for a seat were black Democrat Harvey Gantt and Republican Jesse Helms. Helms’s Senate campaign “sent tens of thousands of postcards to black voters, with false voter information and threats of jail during his contest with Gantt”<sup>92</sup>. Helms wasn’t well liked in black communities. He opposed making Martin Luther King Jr.’s birthday a national holiday and was known as a race-baiter. Jordan was a very influential man in North Carolina, he played for the University of North Carolina during college, and when he was approached by Gantt’s campaign for an endorsement he declined. The reason for his decline was simply “Republicans buy sneakers too”<sup>93</sup>. His decline of Gantt’s offer would have been appropriate if he supported Helms or believed Gantt wasn’t fit for the Senate but Jordan declined for purely selfish reasons. Jordan’s brand identity thrives off of individualism, whether that be on the basketball court or in politics. Jordan was too concerned about his sponsors to offer support to the community that needed it. Although Jordan had reservations about expressing his political opinions, rap and gangsta artists had no problems voicing their critiques.

Michael Franti, a rap artist, and his band Spearhead saw the hypocrisy of the Dream Team members and their lack of engagement in sociopolitical issues. In 1994 Spearhead created the studio album *Home* which contained a song name “Dream Team”. The song addressed the images of harmony USA basketball was trying to promote internationally all the while ignoring the racism that plagued the country. He criticizes USA basketball, the players, and fans for only supporting racial harmony when it comes to the Olympics. Franti starts off the song by naming the colors of the of the Pan-African flag, also known as the Afro-American flag, and the

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<sup>91</sup> Michael Crowley, "Muhammad Ali Was a Rebel. Michael Jordan Is a Brand Name," Nieman Reports, September 15, 1999, accessed October 19, 2015, <http://niemanreports.org/articles/muhammad-ali-was-a-rebel-michael-jordan-is-a-brand-name/>.

<sup>92</sup> LZ Granderson, "The Political Michael Jordan," ESPN, August 14, 2012, accessed February 20, 2016, [http://espn.go.com/nba/story/\\_/id/8264956/michael-jordan-obama-fundraiser-22-years-harvey-gantt](http://espn.go.com/nba/story/_/id/8264956/michael-jordan-obama-fundraiser-22-years-harvey-gantt).

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

Rastafarian flag. He right away is letting the listeners know how he identifies. The clarification of how he identifies can better guide the listener to understand the perspective he has on this topic.

At the beginning of the song he explains how excited he is to be watching the Dream Team. This was the first time the NBA was allowed to participate in the Olympics and he wanted to see two future hall-of-famers, Magic Johnson and Jordan, play together on the same team. However his excitement immediately turns to criticism when he sees fans waving American flags. He questions how a team of mainly black players could represent America when black people were getting treated so poorly at home (“brotha’s on the street and everyone is scared a ya/ so how could ten Africans represent America”). Franti identifies the black players on the Dream Team as Africans and not African-Americans. He is putting their race before their nationality, stating which ones he ranks as the most important. Franti also criticizes USA basketball for having black people represent America because there were so many racial inequalities happening in the country (“bullshit/ it didn’t mean a thing/ cause in the same year we saw Rodney King”). Franti decides that he is going to create his own Dream Team, only metaphorically of course, with people he thinks have been standing in white America’s shadow and haven’t been given the credit they deserve.

Franti’s Dream Team is comprised of minority historical figures who built the America the real Dream Team is representing. These are the cast of characters who are never given their fair due but were influential for American life and culture. In this fictional game it is Franti’s Dream Team that is facing off against America. Franti’s team starts with people who aren’t players but rather people who can add to the atmosphere of the game. He names two rappers Chuck D and Flava Flav as the announcer and color commentator respectively. He also chooses two other entertainers, Doctor Dre and Ed Lover, for halftime entertainment. These two guys were the hosts for a MTV show, *Yo! MTV Raps*, which was a hip hop music specialty program. Franti then moves on to the actual members of the team.

Franti picks Malcolm X to be the coach of his team. He chooses Malcolm as the coach because of his efforts to disrupt America’s structure and where black people are situated within that structure (“he’s chopping up all America’s anatomy”). He also names Chief Crazy Horse, a Native-American chief, his team’s general manager. As for players on the team, Franti chooses Huey Newton, Marcus Garvey, Nat Turner, and Angela Davis. He chooses people who were political activist or leaders in a movement against oppression. These are all people who were

fighters and fought to make American a better place for black people. Finally Franti reveals that his Dream Team has beaten America (“the game is over and the loser’s gotta sweep/ up the glass/ that we busted in the ass”). His team can now set the record straight about America’s past, all of the oppression America has caused, and the many battles they have lost.

Franti moves onto the ceremony for his team after beating America. Instead of putting their hands over their hearts, which would be a pledge to America, they stick their fists up in the air, as it was done in the 1968 Olympics, to symbolize black power. As for music or a national anthem, Franti has Jimi Hendrix playing the spangled banner while Miles Davis blows his horn. Franti even takes a jab at President Bill Clinton saying he’ll be selling popcorn while people like Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr. sit on his team’s bench. Franti emphatically ends his song by repeating “because I like to shoot hoops not brothas”<sup>94</sup>. Franti uses all of the names in this song to make a point about the unseen or unrecognized history of black people in America. He draws a stark contrast between the Dream Team America wants to recognize and the Dream Team that fought for minorities. The point that he is trying to make is that America asks these black men to represent America without recognizing the racism and pain America has caused against black people. This situation becomes worse when black men who are representing America don’t want to help out their black communities to fight further oppression from America. While Franti criticized USA basketball, its players, and fans, gangsta rapper Ice Cube decided to criticize the system that perpetuates violence against black communities.

In 1992 Ice Cube released his third solo studio album *The Predator*. Throughout the album Ice Cube criticizes the government and structures that allow black people to be treated so poorly. The song “The Predator” specifically addressed the Rodney King beating and the violence by the system against black people. Ice Cube opens up the song with dialog from the movie *Predator 2*. Throughout the song Ice Cube continuously refers to himself and other black men as the predator. He is stating that although the system keeps trying to kill black male youth they can’t be taken down and silenced. Ice Cube starts off the song by locating it in South Central L.A.. Cube’s first criticism is about the media and how they don’t give gangsta rap enough exposure even though it is very popular (“cause I’m not stavin, but fuck that Johnny Carson ho/ never had

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<sup>94</sup> Michael Franti, *Dream Team*, perf. Spearhead, Michael Franti and Spearhead, Joe Nicolo and Michael Franti, 1994, MP3.

me on the Late Night Show”). He also criticizes Billboard’s editor who described his previous album *Death Certificate* as racist and hate-mongering.

Cube starts off his second verse by naming all four of the LAPD officers who were charged in the Rodney King beating. He states that those four officers will receive their justice but the L.A. riots won’t do anything in the long term to change the system that allows for this type of injustice (“we’ll fuck them like they fucked us and won’t kiss ‘em/ riots ain’t nothin but diets for the system”). Cube also talks about disturbing white America by voting for Farrakhan, the leader for the Nation of Islam, for president, and invading the suburbs.

In his final verse Cube dissed Ira Reiner, who was the District Attorney on the Rodney King case, by celebrating the death of his career (“got my black rag showin and I’m hoin; Ira Reiner/ can kiss my grits like Flo, on ‘Mel’s Diner”). Cube also goes on to explain that he isn’t above killing any white devil that tries to mess with him. He also takes a shot at Jerry Heller, who was the manager of N.W.A., because he thinks Heller was manipulative and just as bad as other white devils (“Jerry Heller is a devil shit-packer”). Cube finally ends his verse and song with an analogy about the Statue of Liberty. The Statue of Liberty is supposed to symbolize equal opportunity and access in America. It offers promises of the American Dream for everyone. However in reality the American Dream is not accessible to black people. Once black people try to forcibly obtain the dream they were promised, a dream of opportunity and equality, through riots and protests they are accused of inciting racial unrest (and the Statue of Liberty ain’t nothin but a lazy bitch/ don’t wanna give up the crack, to the black/ but you’ll call it racial, if we go and rape the ho”). While there is a lot of misogyny that appears in Ice Cube’s lyrics, he is fighting for change in his community. He is voicing his political opinion and speaking up about issues that threaten his identity. His identity lays with the black communities in South Central L.A.. When the systematic violence threatens his people’s ways of living he chooses to help and fight for black communities.

## 5

# THE SOCIAL GAME

Technology has allowed me to reach my fans directly. Social media: it has been a complete revolution of how to interact, promote and share things.

—Tony Hawk

## AN AGE OF TECHNOLOGY

Athletes have an important voice. American Athletes are mass celebrities that not only have influence in America but also all over the world. They are role models that children aspire to be and learn from. They have big stages and large platforms where they are easily able to display multiple desirable qualities like leadership, dedication, compassion, patience, teamwork, and so much more. These qualities are not only showcased while they are playing their respective sports, but also off the field. The work athletes do with charities, children, and communities speaks volumes. They are role models and when given the chance to weigh-in on political/social issues their words have a large impact. However some athletes decide to remain apolitical.

Apoliticality is the act of having no involvement in political affairs. Those who are apolitical often abstain from partaking in political conversations. The principle of apolitical athletes is to stay neutral. They don't want to be adverse to or alienate white followers, black followers, or followers of other races. Apolitical athletes fear that if they speak up about a political matter they would alienate one side of their fan base. Athletes who present themselves as their brand identities are the ones who typically claim apoliticality. This is especially true when talking about NBA players. Although the NBA has a large number of black players it is relatively white owned and operated. The large majority owners of NBA teams are white and so are the companies that partner with a team for advertisements. For a black NBA player speaking about certain political issues could not only harm his brand but also his employers. As we have seen before the public's perception about a team or a player could mean life or death for that team.

The NBA almost dissolved when advertisers pulled out because the public thought the NBA was too black. NBA team owners become fearful that if their plays are too political it could alienate their fanbase, so they ask their players to err on the side of caution. Therefore on political and social issues the black NBA athletes tend to lean towards apoliticality.

While some athletes take the route of apoliticality it is important for athletes to be activists. It is particularly important for black athletes to be outspoken because black communities have been so suppressed. Black athletes, like Muhammad Ali, Tommie Smith, John Carlos, and Bill Russell, brought issues that black communities were facing to the forefront and forced audiences to recognize the pain black communities felt. They used their platforms to open discussions about social justice. Activist athletes “have the power to then influence the ‘silent majority’ of the American public and reach people who are completely alienated from politics”<sup>95</sup>. Black athletes act as an avenue from their black communities to white audiences.

Many black basketball players grew up in the same situations as black communities. They were “once poor, they went to inner-city schools that didn’t have technology or computer, they didn’t have good books”<sup>96</sup>. They have likely witnessed or know someone who has witnessed police brutality, mass incarceration, drug addictions, or a myriad of other social issues. When black athletes can show white audiences that these issues affect and have affected them these issues may no longer be viewed as isolated incidents that only affect a few. White audiences can’t hide behind the notion that black athletes are the “good blacks” and that they are the poster images for how to avoid being affected by issues in black communities. Outspoken black athletes show that these issues run rampant, are able to affect any black person, and that change needs to be made.

Present day black athletes are taking a stand for black issues and creating a new louder voice for themselves. Athlete’s use of social media has allowed their platforms to have a further reach. LeBron James, for example, has 25.7 million followers on Twitter and another 16 million on Instagram<sup>97</sup>. They are able to display their personalities, opinions, style, and everyday lives on

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<sup>95</sup> Dave Zirin, "The Enduring Importance of the Activist Athlete," *The Nation*, December 10, 2014, accessed February 14, 2016, <http://www.thenation.com/article/enduring-importance-activist-athlete/>.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Jarrel Harris, "NBA Player Accounts to Follow on Social Media," *Top NBA Player Social Media Accounts*, December 9, 2015, accessed February 14, 2016, <http://www.si.com/nba/2015/12/09/top-nba-players-to-follow-twitter-facebook-instagram-stephen-curry-lebron-james>.

social media. It is a tool that is used to connect fans to athletes themselves. Dwyane Wade uses his social media to display “his relationship with Gabrielle Union, his kids, his entrepreneurial endeavors, fashion and more”<sup>98</sup>. Unlike a lot of things in athlete’s lives their social media isn’t controlled or mediated by their agency or their NBA team. While they may tweet the occasional advertisement or get fined for a comment they made on twitter, they still control their social media themselves. Social media has helped athletes connect fans with their personal identity. Fans and the general public are able to see a more personable side of athletes because they see them doing normal everyday activities on social media. People are able to see Dwyane Wade chilling on his hammock, singing along to the radio in his car, and wrapped in blankets watching tv. The way the public perceives athletes is no longer mainly reliant on their brand identity. The public perceives athletes as their personal identities through social media before they identify athletes with their brand identities. Social media also cuts out the middle man between the athletes and the fans.

In the past traditional media, like newspapers or reporters, could twist the words of what an athlete says, but with social media it can be less likely to happen. Although with only 140 characters to a tweet on twitter it can be tough to clearly get your thoughts out to the public. So players realize “you always have to be conscious of what you type, because once you hit send, then it’s out there for the rest of your life. You’ve got to be conscious about that and you don’t ever want to do that irrationally”<sup>99</sup>. The thoughtfulness and clarity players try to use on social media is one reason why their political voice is important.

When Michael Brown was shot and killed in Ferguson, Missouri NBA athletes first reacted on social media. Bradley Beal, a player for the Washington Wizards, knew Brown and was from the same neighborhood. Brown, who was 18-years-old was killed after a confrontation with a Ferguson police officer. The Ferguson police department left Brown’s dead body in the street for hours in plain view of the public. Brown’s case was a big deal because he was unarmed when he was killed by the police. With each successive case of unarmed black men being killed, black communities were becoming more restless and upset by the violence police exhibited.

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ken Berger, "How Players Are Controlling Their Own Media and What It Means for the NBA," CBSSports.com, February 1, 2016, accessed February 14, 2016, <http://www.cbssports.com/nba/writer/ken-berger/25467969/how-players-are-controlling-their-own-media-and-what-it-means-for-the-nba>.



When the Ferguson police officer was not indicted on charges related to Michael Brown's death NBA athletes voiced their outrage on social media.

When the grand jury decision was announced a slew of NBA players took to Twitter and Instagram. David West, a former Indiana Pacer player, tweeted that the "grand jury testimony is a joke...apparently Mike Brown was a mix between the Hulk [and] Wolverine"<sup>100</sup>. West here is referring to the brute image that is automatically assumed of many black men. Black men are often attributed with brute strength and animalistic qualities as a justified reason for the violence that is inflicted upon them. On Instagram LeBron James posted a drawing of Mike Brown embracing Trayvon Martin with the caption "as a society how do we do better and stop things like this happening time after time!! I'm so sorry to these families. Violence is not the answer people. Retaliation isn't the solution as well"<sup>101</sup>. James in his photograph refers to Trayvon Martin, an unarmed black teen that was killed by a civilian in 2012. James also asks the public, presumably black communities, to not resort to violence in the aftermath of the grand jury decision. As we have seen in the past, in instances where a black man was killed and his killer was found not guilty, peaceful protests tend to turn violent. While LeBron and took a less aggressive approach to the Michael Brown situation, one that did not mention race but rather society as a whole, other athletes were more direct.

A handful of NBA athletes directly addressed the role that racism played in the Michael Brown shooting. Kobe Bryant tweeted "the system enables young black men to be killed behind the mask of law"<sup>102</sup>. While Bryant's former teammate Steve Nash, who is white, tweeted that he was "disgusted by [the] decision in Ferguson. Racism is learned. Accepted in systematic suffocation of education and opportunity. What are we saying"<sup>103</sup>. These comments are especially powerful in a time when people are chanting black lives matter. The recognition from athletes that black lives matter can have immense power.

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<sup>100</sup> David Aldridge, "Social Media Gives Players a Louder, Clearer Political Voice," NBA.com, December 1, 2014, accessed February 15, 2016, [http://www.nba.com/2014/news/features/david\\_aldrige/12/01/morning-tip-bradley-beal-david-west-nba-players-react-to-michael-brown-ferguson-missouri-30-nba-things-we-are-thankful-for-qa-with-ty-lawson-denver-nuggets/](http://www.nba.com/2014/news/features/david_aldrige/12/01/morning-tip-bradley-beal-david-west-nba-players-react-to-michael-brown-ferguson-missouri-30-nba-things-we-are-thankful-for-qa-with-ty-lawson-denver-nuggets/).

<sup>101</sup> LeBron James, Michael Brown, digital image, Instagram, December 2014, accessed February 15, 2016, <https://www.instagram.com/p/vzpgtcCTB8/>.

<sup>102</sup> David Aldridge, "Social Media Gives Players a Louder, Clearer Political Voice," NBA.com, December 1, 2014, accessed February 15, 2016, [http://www.nba.com/2014/news/features/david\\_aldrige/12/01/morning-tip-bradley-beal-david-west-nba-players-react-to-michael-brown-ferguson-missouri-30-nba-things-we-are-thankful-for-qa-with-ty-lawson-denver-nuggets/](http://www.nba.com/2014/news/features/david_aldrige/12/01/morning-tip-bradley-beal-david-west-nba-players-react-to-michael-brown-ferguson-missouri-30-nba-things-we-are-thankful-for-qa-with-ty-lawson-denver-nuggets/).

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

Athletes are no longer just athletes. They are the leaders of a generation and sometimes the voice of reason. They are people before basketball players and refuse to just be defined by their profession. When players are vocal about issues that matter to them and their communities they “get tons of positive feedback...[they] know there are young people that are looking for leadership, different points of view, a different image”<sup>104</sup>. NBA athletes aren’t just trying to talk about professional basketball but also issues they have to confront in everyday life. David West feels that “[in] the larger [NBA players’] group, sometimes you get isolated, in the bubble that’s professional basketball...but we’re a part of the human family, part of the African-American family...you’ve got to be willing to [speak]. Everything can’t always be about being safe or being careful”<sup>105</sup>. The professional basketball athletes of this generation aren’t afraid to share their voice.

The vocalness from this generation’s NBA athletes about political issues is unheard of. When the Rodney King beating and L.A. riots happened it was almost impossible to get NBA athletes to give a comment. Whether they were worried about backlash from fans, their employers, or their advertisers, many players didn’t think the reward was worth the risk of speaking. However the advent of social media has made players more vocal. Whether it’s because they control their platforms, they are better able to connect with their fans, or it feels like an extension of themselves, NBA athletes are very active on social media. One of the great ways they use social media is to quickly get their opinions about political/social issues to the mass public. Black NBA players acknowledgement of issues that plague black communities is especially important because it brings issues to a bigger platform, makes white audiences confront the issues, and shows support. The fact that black NBA players are able to speak from their hearts and express their vocal identification with black communities is one reason why they choose to share their opinions with this medium. Their vocalness in turn displays leadership and an understanding with the black communities they represent.

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

# CONCLUSION

## A LOOK TOWARDS THE FUTURE

Social media is constantly evolving. Ten years ago it would have been hard to imagine that the NBA and its players would become Twitter elite or that Vine would become one of the primary mediums for viewing clips from NBA games. I'm sure nobody foresaw the cult following of the MJ crying meme has or how it has taken over sports. I'm sure Jordan himself never thought this singular image would become a significant part of his image. Social media has not only changed the way players interact with fans but also the way fans criticize players. People always try to compare 90s basketball to present day ball but social media has changed the game itself. People are now able to go back and criticize players directly about every move, missed shot, turnover they have. The criticism doesn't stop once the game is over, it lives on forever. Current NBA players have fans and the media criticizing them 24/7. Of course these fans and journalist also get a taste of their own medicine when players tweet or message back.

While Twitter has become a popular medium for players to express themselves they are constantly looking for new platforms. A lot of players have moved onto Snapchat where they can give fans a 10 second view of their lives. LeBron James invented his own streaming channel called Uninterrupted. The channel has many star athletes across different sports record short videos about whatever they want. Some choose to talk about their team, their training, their hangouts and much more. While this streaming channel isn't really any different than Twitter's or Snapchat's video service, it seems to have taken off. The point is that athletes are taking it upon themselves to become more familiar with their fans and let their fans see more of their personal identities. It doesn't stop at current players either.

Charles Barkley isn't on social media but TNT's *Inside the NBA* has acted like his social media. *Inside the NBA* is a show that appears before, during, and after NBA games. The lineup of Shaq, Ernie Johnson, Kenny Smith, and Barkley sit around a table and discuss what is happening around the NBA or give a break down of the game TNT is about to air. This show has helped

change Barkley's branded identity of a brute to a funny guy. He is affectionately called Chuck on the show and spends most of the time crack jokes or throwing insults at Shaq. His intimidating image has been replaced with a softer one. As a result Chuck has on several occasion expressed his opinions about Black Lives Matters and the tragedies that makes the national news. While his opinions sometimes get him in trouble and are seemingly unpopular amongst the majority of black people who are active on social media, he nonetheless became very vocal about sociopolitical issues in black communities. The same can be said of rappers.

Although rappers have always been eager to express their views, social media has made it easier. Instead of having to spend months writing a song about a certain social injustice or recent event, rappers are able to compose a thoughtful message on social media that can reach the masses quickly. For example Chance the Rapper, a Chicago based rapper, is very vocal on social media. He uses his twitter to get the word out about charities that he is participating in, the corrupt local government, protests, and anything else related to Chicago. He most recently is known for attacking Spike Lee on Twitter over the depiction of Chicago and its black youth in *Chi-Raq* (2015), a film Lee directed. Instead of having to create a diss track he was able to take his argument and criticism to the source.

I believe the ways entertainers use social media will only grow. They are already increasingly utilizing social media to promote themselves and their brands. The personal connection a fan can feel with an athlete they have only watched on Snapchat or Twitter is fascinating. I can only imagine the greater access to our favorite rappers', celebrities', and athletes' lives that will become available as technology progresses and how this will affect the outreach of entertainers towards those who are victimized.

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